

# PRAISING PAUL



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING PAUL

### Enigma

The Apostle Paul is an enigma. Some see him as the champion of the Christian faith, while others view him as having distorted the Way of Jesus. Some see him as a radical social reformer of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, while others view him through the lens of centuries of misogyny and racial oppression that have used his words to justify human depravity. Some read Paul's letters and the logic leaps from the page, while others struggle to wade through what seem like deep waters of incomprehensibility.

True confession #1: I am the "some" in each of the above sentences. True confession #2: I also resonate with the "others" in each of the above sentences and have compassion for their struggles with Paul.

Take heart: The Apostle Paul has always been an enigma. Paul dubbed himself "the Apostle to the Gentiles." Paul took the faith that belonged to one people and invited others into it. With the invitation came the necessity to interpret the centuries-old traditions of the mother faith and articulate how the traditions might best be lived in a different culture. Through the act of interpretation came accommodations to these new people and their ways. Every accommodation was encountered with some ambivalence, and often open hostility, by those who felt the tradition belonged exclusively to them.

If this sounds like a familiar story, it should. Much of today's "culture wars" and socio-political polarization is a dialogue between who we have been and who we are becoming, between how we have told our story and how we should be telling our story, between what must remain and what can be released. In his own day, Paul was the catalyst for creating a similar culture war between the ways one people had always told their story and a new interpretive lens for the narrative.

It is not my intention to ignite another culture war with *Praying Paul*. That said, the social and theological dynamics that influenced Paul are present in this work. We live in an age in which churches seek to tell the "old, old story" traditionally, progressively, or as some form of traditional-progressive hybrid. Every church is doing its best to tell the story of Jesus, but we live in a culture in which many are either apathetic or hostile to its telling. The enigma that we encounter is the same enigma Paul encountered: How can churches tell the old story in a new way without betraying core principles? *Praying Paul* seeks to be one example of how to answer this question.

### Interpretive Paraphrase

*Praying Paul* is an "interpretive paraphrase"<sup>1</sup> that balances scrupulosity to the Greek text and creativity to modern expressions. I have tried to convey faithfully Paul's message yet do so in a way that invites the reader to see beyond the familiarity of beloved words of Scripture to experience the Word more deeply. This balancing act required me to make choices about what words give precision and clarity for textual understanding, what words invite the reader's imagination to hear the music of Paul's letter, and when it is necessary to expand on the Greek text in order to convey culture and customs unseen by most modern readers. I will let you, Gentle Reader, be the judge as to whether I have made wise choices.

Writing a paraphrase is an opportunity to explore fresh means of expressing faith and life. I have continued the usage of "God-rhythms" and "God-life" that appear in my previous work *Praying Matthew* as I feel they convey a jazz-like sense of musical harmony appropriate to life with Jesus. As well, I have chosen not to use Paul's famous dichotomy of "spirit" versus "flesh" (Greek *pneuma* versus *sarx*) and instead have chosen to speak in terms of our true self versus our false self, after the example of Father Richard Rohr and others. I find this wording works for me, and I'll let you decide if it works for you. (For the record, I also considered "spirit nature" versus "sin nature.")

I have made other linguistic changes in my attempt to create an environment in which readers might hear God's Word as a fresh expression and to receive it with insight, imagination, appreciation, and affirmation. For example, the word "grace," a word that I dearly love, is paraphrased as "loving-kindness" and "apostles" becomes "sent ones." Some of my verbal experiments will work; others will not. Please don't judge the entire manuscript if one or more of these experiments fall flat for you! Instead, continue reading through Paul's letters in search of nourishment for your heart, mind, and spirit. I hope you will take a "water off a duck's back" approach to experiments that fall flat. Many of the footnotes compare my word choice to the choices made by English translations or suggest how the Greek text might allow for such an interpretation. I highly recommend you read the footnotes, especially if you have a question about why I have phrased something in a particular way.

Writing (and reading) a paraphrase is also an opportunity to challenge one's faith or, at least, explore the

spiritual life from different angles. Though I am absolutely committed to inclusive language when referring to humanity, when speaking of the divine I prefer personal pronouns rather than the repetition of “God,” as in, “God said that God would bring God’s deliverance.” For me, personal pronouns better communicate that God is relational—the Holy Trinity, Three-in-One! I am personally comfortable speaking of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as saying something like, “God said that he would bring his deliverance.” That’s me: my comfort zone, my customary way of speaking the faith. And that’s okay.

However, as I have participated in small groups with female colleagues and listened to their sense of being excluded by the use of exclusively male expressions of God, I found myself wanting to experiment with the language I use in *Praying Paul*. If I am going to follow Paul’s ethical guidance of “charity before freedom” (c.f. Romans 14), I need to be cognizant that the way I speak of God may impact my beloved in Jesus in profound ways, for good or ill. Insisting on my personal comfort zone when others are negatively impacted is not okay.

So what I have done—and I invite you to join me in a spiritual experiment of sorts—is use *Abba* and *Imma* (Aramaic for “Daddy” and “Mommy”) when speaking of God. I take turns by section using *Abba* and *Imma*. Some sections have lots of “Abbas” and some just a few. Some sections have lots of “Immas” and some just a few. I wondered, as I wrote, how this would affect my experience of the biblical text as Word of God. I wondered how my commitment to using personal pronouns while seeking to honor inclusive expressions of the One we worship as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier might affect me spiritually and ethically. I wonder how you will experience this fresh reading. Feel free to love it (or not), to embrace it (or not), or to be uncertain about it (and having a definite opinion is okay too). I ask only that you accept the challenge and opportunity to explore your faith and spiritual life through this fresh expression of Paul.

I mined Google Translate for how the name Paul is translated by other languages. I hear the Gospel through western, educated, individualistic, rationalistic, and democratic ears, which makes me WEIRD.<sup>2</sup> Using a variation of the English Paul reminded me that the Gospel is a global reality. As I moved from letter to letter, I used different versions of the name Paul: starting with other Romance languages (e.g., Pablo), I branched into what for me are more exotic sounding names (e.g. Baoluo). I

discovered as I wrote that I “heard” Paul a bit differently when using a variant of the English name Paul. I invite you, therefore, to notice your own experience and become more fully aware of how the Spirit engages you through your reading of the Word. What would the Spirit have you hear?

Each letter begins with an introduction. These are not traditional introductions you might find in an English translation, for they do not cover the basics of outline, key themes, etc. Rather, the introductions provide insight to how I *as a writer* sought to approach the letter particular letter in order to assist you *as a reader* regarding what you are about to experience. These introductions were written in previous months as each letter was completed. I chose to keep these introductions as originally constructed so readers can “follow along” with my journey through engaging and encountering Paul.<sup>3</sup>

### Engaging and Encountering Paul

It is not enough to read Scripture without engaging and encountering the Word. As John Calvin once wrote, “Let not the Word of God flit about in your mind alone but allow it to seep into the deep places, into the very marrow of your soul.” The aphorism that “the Bible is the only book that we read that reads us back” is as true for an interpretive paraphrase as for a traditional translation.

To assist in the work of engaging and encountering the Word, each passage includes a poem and a prayer that reflects upon the passage. The poems begin by using *Haiku* (five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables), then *Cinquain* (five lines: one word, two words, three words, four words, one word), before moving into free verse. If the poems do not connect for you, I invite you to form your own poetic response to the Word. The prayers are written from my personal perspective, as if I am praying. If you do not connect with my personal experience, I invite you to craft your own prayer that speaks from your heart to God.

I pray that your experience of *Praying Paul* will give you insight into the Apostle that deepens your faith, strengthens your hope, and enflames your love for all creation. I pray that, for all of us, renewing our journey into faith, hope, and love will help us unravel the enigma of how to be God’s people in the world today.

Brad Munroe  
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<sup>1</sup> This is actually the third interpretive paraphrase I have written, *Praying Matthew* and *Praying Luke* being the other two.

<sup>2</sup> c.f. Jonathon Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*. (Vintage: New York, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> I have also chosen to keep footnotes that are redundant (e.g., that *apostoleos* is the Greek word that literally translates as sent

ones) because of my belief that some leaders may wish to begin with whichever letter seems apropos for their study group in the moment, or relevant to their group's experience, rather than reading the entirety of *Praying Paul* in the order presented. I want each letter to be able to stand alone with coherence.



## GLOSSARY OF COMMONLY USED NOTES

**AGAPE:** *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phelos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

**CLEAR IN THE LIGHT OF THE SUN:** The Greek word *eilikrineia*, usually translated as “sincerity” or “purity,” literally means “clear in the light of the sun,” as in there exist no contaminants, no mixed ingredients.

**CHAPTERS AND VERSES:** This passage is a good example of the fickleness of biblical chapters and verses. The story of how chapter and verse became a part of the Bible originates after the invention of the Gutenberg press. An editor, seeking a marketing advantage for his translation of Scripture, decided to add in chapters and verses (and did a decent job with it). He placed marks upon the manuscript as notations while traveling by carriage from Paris to Rome (where he hoped to secure Papal patronage for his “new” version of the Bible). The joke among scholars is that the editor sometimes placed an errant mark when the carriage hit a pothole, leading to some awkward transitions.

**DUNAMIS:** *Dunamis* is the word translated as “power” but from which we get dynamite and dynamic. As in other words in the *Praying Paul* series, I paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow God’s dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

**GATHERING:** The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as “church.” The literal meaning is “gathering,” with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

**GIFT / LOVING-KINDNESS:** The Greek word used is *charis*, usually translated as “grace” but also has the connotation of gift.

**GLORY:** “Glory” in Paul’s Hebraic upbringing has the sense of light, weightiness (as in being substantive), and reflection. I have chosen to emphasize the light and reflection nuances though note, too, all service has a substantive weightiness to it.

**IMAGO DEI:** *Imago dei* is a Latin term that means image of God. Theologians use *imago dei* to refer to the truth that all humankind are created bearing God’s image within them (c.f. Genesis 1:27).

**KAIROS:** *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for time. *Chronos*, from which we get the English chronological, means sequential or linear time. *Kairos* refers to the key moment, the inflection point. When Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God saying, “Repent, the time is at hand,” he referred to *kairos* time. When nine-months pregnant women shows up at a hospital saying, “It’s time,” she is speaking of *kairos*.

**KOINONIA:** The Greek word *koinonia* translates as “fellowship” and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community.

**PAIDAGOGOS:** c.f. Galatians 3:24. In Greek culture, a *paidagogos* refers to a tutor or mentor for the children of a first-century Hellenistic family. Technically, the *paidagogos* was responsible for moral and educational training.

**PRISON/CHAINS:** Paul is in and out of prison frequently in his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans’ presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Paul’s preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off-shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

**REFINER’S FIRE:** c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer’s Fire.” Rather than Dante’s “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

**RE-MEMBER:** The hyphen in “re-mem-bering” is intentional and seeks to convey that the act of remembering can be more than mental nostalgia: “Oh remember that time we were at the beach and you splashed Henry?” Re-mem-bering can convey that the act of looking back brings to life and creates anew a cherished life or love: “Remember the way Grandma’s perfume would get on you when she hugged you? I can still smell Grandma sometimes when I think about it.” In this illustration, Grandma is not actually present, of course, and yet her presence is Real in a blessed and mysterious way that is a gift of God.

**RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS:** The Greek word used is *dikaiosune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaiosune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Paul's theology. For Paul, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior. 😊

**SENT ONE(S):** The Greek word used is *apostoleos*, which usually is translated as "apostle," from the verb meaning to send; thus "sent one."

**SET APART:** The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as "holy" and literally means "set apart"—both set apart from broken values and culture and set apart for God's values and kin-dom.

**SHALOM:** *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

**SHEOL:** *Sheol* is a Hebrew word that denotes a shadowy underworld; not quite Hell, not even Hades, but a place where

there is life of a sort but not the kind we know on the earthly plane of being.

**SOVEREIGN ABOVE CAESAR/THE COSMOS/THE BODY:** The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus' authority as above Caesar's authority.

**STAND:** In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

**TORAH:** *Torah* is the Hebrew word that translates into English as Law. I chose to use Torah rather than Law in the paraphrase to remind readers that Paul's reference is not to a generalized ethical teaching but to the specific, covenantal obligations articulated in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

**VOICES (GREEK LINGUISTICS):** Greek has three voices: active—I act, passive—I am acted upon, and middle—I and thee act together.

# PRAYING

## 1 ROMANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING ROMANS

I became a Christian when I was 17—the Book of Romans was the vehicle for capturing my imagination and wooing my spirit. I was not raised going to church but had been invited to a youth group by a friend I was dating. I agreed to attend, reluctantly, and was surprised by my experience.

Pastor Bill was attending seminary at that time and had a three-hour class on Romans on Monday afternoons. He would drive back to San Clemente just in time to lead youth group. His topic was Romans. Bill would spend the hour driving home pondering how he would condense the lecture notes he had just taken into a 45-minute Bible study to a group of high school students. It was the most in-depth, intensive study of Romans I have had other than my *Exegesis of Romans in the Greek* class at Princeton Theological Seminary. The logic of the Gospel leapt from the page as we studied Romans.

Romans is Paul’s missionary support letter to the gathering<sup>1</sup> of Jesus’ followers in Rome. He desired to expand his missionary work into Spain and needed the Roman believers’ financial support to fund his work (Romans 15:24). Rome’s economic and political influence was central to the functioning of the Empire and even the Christian minority in Rome had increased ability to support Paul’s work financially.

Paul’s dilemma in seeking support from the Romans is that the gathering was a mixture of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Paul famously nicknamed himself “The Apostle to the Gentiles” so there was a natural connection between his message and the Gentile Christians in the Roman gathering. However, Paul understood the need to explain himself to the Jewish Christians, to convince them that his teaching of the Good News was consistent with God’s revelation to the people of Israel and fulfilled in Jesus. Romans is Paul’s extended, detailed, theologically constructed defense of his teaching.

As always, writing a paraphrase presents certain dilemmas regarding structure and form. For Romans, the

dilemma is how to capture Paul’s use of Greek rhetoric in an interpretive paraphrase. Long known to biblical scholars but not evident in actual translations, Paul had advanced knowledge and skill in Greek rhetorical forms and used them prolifically, especially in Romans.

The Book of Romans is a long-form argument perhaps better suited for a Hellenistic law school classroom than a modern church pulpit; at least, that is the way it would have read to a first-century ear. Paul presented an extended argument for his understanding of the Gospel and skillfully used Greek rhetoric to do it. I have tried to convey this sense of Paul “building a case” through inserting transitional phrases and sentences from one section to the next. These transitions, some of which are one or two sentences, are not in the Greek text but included in this interpretive paraphrase in an attempt to convey how a first-century reader may have heard Romans when it was read to the community.<sup>2</sup>

For *Praying Romans* I chose to use Haiku poetry to interpret the text rather than my preferred free form style. A Haiku is a three-line poem consisting of five syllables, seven syllables, and five syllables. My reason for choosing Haiku was that given the extended argumentation in Romans I wanted the challenge of using a poetic form that requires focused conciseness as I sought to interpret the Scripture.

In *Praying Romans* I chose to use the Spanish version of the apostle’s name—Pablo—in recognition of his unfulfilled plan to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to folks in Spain. I have no doubt that had Pablo been able to make that missionary journey to the Spanish people, he would have captured their imaginations and wooed their spirits, and the logic of the Gospel would have leapt from his words into their hearts.

Brad Munroe  
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## Romans 1:1-7

Pablo, a servant of Jesus the Anointed, chosen and sent<sup>3</sup> by the same Jesus as one set apart<sup>4</sup> for Good News work and sent to announce what God has been doing, is doing, and will do—the same Good News work that God promised through truth-tellers in ages past, which our ancestors recorded as sacred writings. These writings, in ways humble and ways of grandeur, point to Imma's Son, born of King David's family in human terms and announced to the world as Imma's Son in spiritual terms through his resurrection. This Jesus the Anointed is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>5</sup>

Through Jesus (and to be able to honor him and all that he stands for) we were given spiritual gifts, chosen as ambassadors, and then sent to the Gentiles—to those who are not from Israel but from the four corners of the earth. Jesus' commission to us was to call people to obedience and trust as Imma's children and as faithful servants. Both we and you are a part of this Good News work, for Imma says we belong—belong to her, belong to Jesus the Anointed, and belong to one another through the Divine Spirit that makes us family.

To all the saints in Rome who are counted among the beloved, who belong to Imma and are a part of this holy family, we extend the gift<sup>6</sup> of reconciled relationship from God our mother and Messiah Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

*Servant sent to tell  
Jesus Anointed is Lord  
Good News rejoicing*

God, it's me. Not sure what I'm getting into. Pablo has such a bad rep: arrogant, sexist, difficult to understand (at times). I know he wrote a third of the New Testament, but, really, he's such a flawed Christian! Why did you send Pablo? Couldn't you find someone better? And yet Pablo's credentials are impressive. Perhaps I'll let him unfold his case before judging him.

## Romans 1:8-17

First things first: I thank my Abba through Jesus for you, all of you. I thank Abba because of you who live in Rome, in the heart of the Empire, which some consider

the belly of the beast: your trust is known all over the world. Abba is my witness how often I pray for y'all: night and day, at all hours of day and night, I lift you up to the same God whom I serve spiritually in my Good News work of preaching. I ask that I might be able, finally, to journey to Rome and meet you. I desperately want to give all of you a spiritual gift, to share a bit of my spiritual power with y'all, and, of course, to receive your encouragement of me, too, for I know we share the same obedient trust and do the same Good News work.

I wish y'all knew how often I have planned to come to you, my beloved. So far my plans have been foiled, but when I get to Rome I am certain I will reap a harvest among you. As one sent to Gentiles, I am especially motivated to do Good News work among both the learned Greeks and the alleged Barbarians, among both those whom the philosophers consider wise and those whom all people consider foolish. It matters not to me their state of soul; I just know Abba has gifted me with the ability to do Good News work among them, which is why I so urgently long to be with you in Rome.

I do not apologize for the Good News work I do, for it is not really my work but Abba's work—the power of God opening hearts and minds, luring souls and curing spirits, bringing justice and joy into the world one person at a time and to all who will receive Abba's gift of presence and peace. It started with the Jews and is now moving outward to the Greeks. Abba's Good News expresses to the entire world his intentions: to restore right relationship<sup>7</sup> between Abba and all people. Anyone who opens themselves to this movement of Abba's Good News learns to trust, from beginning to end it's all about learning to trust. It's just like Habbakuk wrote: "Right relationships are lived out by learning to trust."<sup>8</sup>

*Spiritual gift  
Power of God revealing  
Teaching others trust*

God, it's me. My heart quickens. I want right relationships. I want them with you. I want them with my family and neighbors. I want to see more right relationships all around me, in my church and on the news! But what does trust have to do with anything?

## Romans 1:18-32

The resting face of Imma in response to human sin is justice. And when justice is denied, subjugated, or set aside for the sake of convenience, greed, or hatred, Imma has a commitment to respond, and her face is set against the injustice. Imma's face revealed as justice feels like anger to us but is actually divine relinquishment—a letting go of a part of Imma's hold on us that we might live according to our own will. What we perceive as Imma's anger is actually her handing us back to ourselves. When this happens, brokenness erupts, relationships rupture, and wickedness experiences delight.

From before recorded history, humans have known all that we need to know about the Living God. Some call it being spiritual, others talk about the numinous, still others speak of the mystical or magical. Each refers to the God-shaped hole in our hearts that belongs only to Imma. From the very beginning of creation, Imma's Breath has whispered to humanity, luring us to prayer and to praise, inviting us to wonder about Imma's person: invisible and eternal, not seen with the eye but understood with the spirit, seeing Imma's art and craft in nature.

We have no alibi for our ignorance. Knowing something—or I should say Someone—greater and above called to us, we humans were neither willing to be weighed down by Imma's presence nor wanting to acknowledge her power. Instead, we thought we could live life on our own—by our own wit and wisdom—and so became fools. We even turned our eyes from the heavens to obsess over what our hands could carve into wood or stone or metal. Instead of contemplating the immortal we got curious about so-called gods who looked like ourselves or birds or bugs.

Imma's resting face accommodated us: the divine relinquishment gave us back to ourselves. We were given permission to do as we pleased, and so we did. We bartered away truth for lies. We sacrificed the eternal on the altar of the now. We worshiped human ones rather than the Holy One.

Imma's resting face accommodated us completely: the divine relinquishment even allowing us to distort our natural desires into whirlwinds of lust, twisting the beauty of our sexual intimacy into a carnival of indecency—a fun house mirror misrepresenting the purpose for our passions. We paid the price in our relationships with one another; indeed, in our families and in our very persons.

Imma's resting face accommodated us fully and completely: the divine relinquishment granting that, in our

refusal to open ourselves to Imma, we longed for depravity; so all we do is tinged with brokenness and even at our most pure we succumb to pettiness. At our most vile, we succumb to such malice of heart, mind, and spirit that we build systems to perpetuate evil. Even those considered good cannot overcome the madness of our imbalanced notions of right from wrong, our systems of inequity and injustice, or our distorted definitions of what makes for a good life. Though we know it to be madness in our deepest heart and clearest mind—we accept it as normal and punish anyone who says otherwise. We give honor, adulation, and income to all who approve—to anyone who lives and moves and makes their being within the systems we have built.

*No need for God's help  
Let go and let me do it  
Broken creation*

*God, it's me. It says here you let go of me (at least a little), so that I (well, I suppose it's the royal "We") could do our own thing. You might have noticed it isn't going so well. I'm sure that's because of other people, not me, so if I may be bold to ask: why don't you make them shape up or ship out? Or do I have something to learn, too?*

## Romans 2:1-4

We have no alibi for our sin and the justice demanded from us; no ability to transform hurt into the wholeness Abba requires. If we have judged anyone for their sin—(and who hasn't done this at least once?)—then judgment is also upon us. Playing the judgment game means we all lose, for all of us participate in the broken systems that shape society; all of us are influenced by its damaged and damaging structures, which form and inform our inability to live toward Abba's holiness. All of this is not up for debate, for it is based on the deepest truths of the universe. When we inflict judgment on others, we serve it primarily to ourselves, for mere humans are not greater than Abba; indeed, we scoff at Abba's kindness and take advantage of his long-suffering nature when we judge others. Why can't we understand Abba's patient mercy is intended to lead us toward turning our lives around?

*Silly to suggest  
Expecting changes in us  
Easier to judge*

God, it's me. If I'm reading Paul correctly, I'm not supposed to judge others. Is that correct? This seems a bit absurd. I mean, looking out the window at others' sin is much more entertaining and self-affirming than looking in the mirror at my own. Am I missing something here? What am I supposed to do for fun?

### **Romans 2:5-16**

Our hearts of stone lead us down a hard road. We think we can do as we please, that we are the authors of our own narrative, that destiny belongs to the bold and "Bold" is our middle name, when the reality is that we are only piling misery on top of malice. Imma's resting face in response to our sin remains justice—always has been and always will be. As the Psalmist reminds us, "Imma keeps a record even when we want to forget."<sup>9</sup>

Lest we feel Imma is unfair, please believe Imma gives eternal life to absolutely everyone who seeks to do good, lives with honor, and aims for life without corruption, but the standard is perfection. Anyone who seeks to bless self before others, who rejects truth when it is inconvenient, who lives by the rules of our damaged hearts or broken systems, Imma will remember and justice will be demanded. Justice—perfect and absolute—will be required first from the Jews, to whom the covenant was given, and then to all others to whom Israel served as a light and a guide. Imma does not play favorites: everyone will get a fair hearing.

Those who are not Jews, who were not gifted with the covenant and Torah to bind their lives to the Eternal One, may say, "But that's not fair! We didn't know!" Yet those who sin without Torah still sin—the misery and malice they heap upon others and themselves still requires justice. They weren't cheated because they didn't hear or specifically know the Torah that binds our lives to Imma.

Anyone who binds their lives to Imma fully and completely will be spared. They demonstrate how Imma whispers to all creation, all cultures, and every soul. They reveal with their lives how Imma guides us all toward truth and the kind of beauty that expresses the love that is at the very core of the universe. Find someone who lives like that and you will find someone able to stand without shame

when Imma exposes the secrets of all human hearts on the great Day when the kin-dom is unveiled in its fullness.

*Immortality  
Perfection seeking a way  
Not now, not ever*

God, it's me. To be honest, a part of me thinks this is pretty unfair. Why can't you grade on a curve? Why isn't "better than most" good enough? And then I remember how Danny from fifth grade beat the absolute snot out of me when I was in third grade. Anger. Pain. Humiliation. I can't let it go, and don't want you to let it go either. I wish there was another way to sort this all out. I'll keep thinking about it and let you know if I have any ideas for you.

### **Romans 2:17-24**

Of course, there is another side to this story. Abba shared a covenant with Israel and gave them laws to guide them, to bind their lives to the life of Abba. This covenant has been shared to the four corners of the earth!

What can we say about those people who have always known Abba's love, always taught Abba's laws, always rejoiced in him as their Savior and Sovereign? Such folks have built the society upon which we stand and all that is good within it. Such folks have taught generations of our children, have shared wisdom with their words and shown honor with their deeds. They are a light to the nations!

And yet.

And yet the society they built, though good, is flawed. The children they taught, though learned, are too often filled with prejudice. The wisdom they shared, though eternal, has too easily fallen on deaf ears, including their own. The honor they have shown has too often and too easily been mirrored by dishonorable deeds.

You who believe in "liberty and justice for all," do you give liberty to all? Are all a recipient of justice in equal measure? You who profess "in Abba we trust," is your trust conveyed in how your money is spent? Or is the real source of your trust your health and your wealth, military might and political power? You who profess to honor Abba, do you dishonor him in how you live your lives? As the truth-teller Isaiah wrote:

Abba is dishonored in the nations because of you!<sup>10</sup>

*Words without substance  
Impotent lord and savior  
Do not mock Abba*

God, it's me. Okay, now I am really freaked out! If the good, religious folks aren't good, who is? The broadside against their righteousness shatters all hope I have that I can do anything, anything at all, to make things right between us. Am I really without hope in this world and the next?

### **Romans 2:25-29**

Religious symbolism has value—rituals and symbols convey truth and beauty the mind cannot touch—but only if it leads us to live more deeply into the truth, with greater compassion and vigorous conviction, embracing all as beloved of Imma the Creator. Baptism and Eucharist, Circumcision and Footwashing are all intended to deepen obedience, but it is obedient faith that is the goal, not the ritual itself. The one who ignores the symbols of faith yet lives the substance of faith will bear witness against those who follow every ritual but break every commandment. A ritual that is an outward and visible sign of an inward void of nothingness conveys no power. Only the ritual that reflects an inward truth and radiates beauty and justice into the world conveys authority—the Divine Spirit speaks Imma's praise through it.

*Outside looking good  
Rotting core, twisted values  
Who belongs to God?*

God, it's me. I think I understand. I love the rituals of my faith—the liturgy makes my heart sing and infants in the arms of the baptismal waters bring tears of joy. But I get it: it's all about love. Love as an action, a commitment, a way of life. This sounds hopeful, even if it's difficult to do.

### **Romans 3:1-8**

So you may ask, "What's the value of religion, with its symbols and rituals? Or, for that matter, what's the value of growing up religious?" To which I respond, "Great in every way, for those who have religion and who were raised religious, you have always known that you belong to Abba."

There are some who do not trust and cannot trust, but their inability does not negate Abba's ability and willingness to love with patience and perseverance, through thick and thin. Abba is faithful! Abba is true even when we all are liars, just like the Psalmists said:

You prove true when you speak, and your truth wins the day.<sup>11</sup>

It's as if our poor record with relationships highlights just how faithful Abba really is. But don't think this means we're doing Abba a favor by messing up our lives and, especially, our most intimate relationships. (This would be a human way of thinking.) Not at all! If our screw-ups helped Abba, he would be disqualified as the judge of all. Never! Someone could even argue, "If my sin makes Abba look good, I shouldn't be held accountable for my sin." That's zany talk! If, (as some people slanderously suggest), we were to teach that doing evil is good, that is an utterly bizarre notion and worthy of censure.

Faithful and true  
Even when I can't or won't  
Stay with me, Lord: PLEASE!

God, it's me. I wasn't raised knowing your love. It came to me later—you came to me later. And I'm so thankful you did. I know others who have always known your love. It's the air they breathe. They hold their breath sometimes, but not forever. Eventually they have to exhale. And breathe some more.

### **Romans 3:9-20**

So what's the bottom line? Are religion and rituals and symbols a help or a hindrance? Well, the truth is: that's the wrong question. The right question is whether any of us do—or can—get it right: right with Imma or right with one another. And the answer to that question is a big, fat, NO! We are all broken in one way or another, all tinged with sin, all our halos tilted. When it comes to Imma's standard, perfection, it matters not if we were raised in church or a brothel: we all fall short. It's like the Psalmist and truth-tellers told us long ago:

No one gets it, not a one and not even close.  
No one knows right from wrong—not well enough.

No one is seeking to know Imma, not fully.  
 All hearts turn inward.  
 All our good deeds add up to bupkis.  
 All our goodness added together equals nothing.  
 We swallow death and regurgitate deceit.  
 We spew poison and our mouths drool with bitterness.  
 We shed blood and relish ruin and misery.  
 There is no peace within us.  
 There is no awe of Imma.  
 There is no fear in all that our eyes can rest upon.<sup>12</sup>

So, again, what's the bottom line? We know the Torah's standard is perfection and no one meets the standard. We can talk all we want about how "good" we are, but deep down we know all our talk is gibberish. We are better off keeping our mouths shut. Remain silent and listen to the justice we deserve. It will sound harsh at first, and even for a while beyond that, but it's the path to our wholeness. If we can just keep our mouths closed and our hearts open, we might realize we have a problem.

And that's when a new day begins.

*Harsh truth liberates  
 Our end is the beginning  
 Now we are ready*

God, it's me. Bile rises within me as I realize I am one of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips!<sup>13</sup> I want to accuse Pablo of overstating his case, but wars and pandemics and protests in the streets prevent me from such a full-throated, self-serving, excuse-making, justification. My lips will remain silent, at least for a time, while I listen some more. Imma, please bring Good News!

### **Romans 3:21-31**

Abba's craving for right relationships was revealed in Jesus—it came like a tsunami that crashed upon the shores of sin and washed away all brokenness. This righteousness that comes from Abba is conveyed beyond and even outside Torah. It both encompasses and surpasses all that the truth-tellers proclaimed. The right relationship that comes from Abba overwhelms with love and overshadows with mercy as we begin to trust in Jesus. Indeed, it comes to all who believe into him.

There is no difference between nations or races or social standing in needing this righteousness, for both Israelites and Greeks, wise and foolish, of high and low standing, anyone and everyone who lives or has lived or will someday live needs what only Abba can provide: healing and wholeness down to the marrow of our soul. It really does not matter one's religious pedigree, none of us compare to Abba, no one lives up to the standard: perfection. Instead, Abba unleashes innocence upon us as a gift through Jesus the Anointed. Words almost fail here, the event, the happening, the unveiling of the gift is not just about the gift but about the giver of the gift. What is unveiled is like a judge pronouncing a guilty convict innocent; or like a government bail-out of a bankrupt corporation; or like a soldier who gives their life to save a friend. And all of this comes as we open ourselves to trusting Abba.

If you ask, "Why on earth would Abba do this?" the answer is, "Abba's resting face demanded it." For he has been patient beyond measure and left our sin unpunished. Yet it is not Abba's desire to punish. It is Abba's desire—indeed, his passion—that we be made whole. It is Abba's yearning to be the One to make us this way. In Abba's zeal, he balanced holiness and love and had justice and mercy embrace in the one man, Jesus. Abba did this freely to bless the world through Jesus, to make it possible for all to learn how to trust.

So what do we have to brag about? Not much. Bragging about how religious we've been all our life seems silly. Did having the Torah<sup>14</sup> makes us good? Not hardly! Did we become good because we knew the Torah? Not really! In fact, to be honest we have to say that Abba is the God of both the religious and those without any beliefs, for he is Creator of all humankind! Does that mean being a good Jew or a good Christian is meaningless? Not at all! It just means that being called a good Jew or a good Christian is not about our goodness but about the way we learn to trust Abba.

*Many needing love  
 One just and justifier  
 Thank you seems too small*

God, it's me. I need this! I need a soul tsunami! I need to be overwhelmed by love and overwhelmed by mercy. I need all this and so much more. I sometimes find Pablo's Gospel difficult to believe: a raw gift so pure

that to look at it might blind me; like looking straight into the sun! Yet, I know, you have given me eyes with which to see the Son, and seeing, I believe. Help my unbelief!

### **Romans 4:1-10**

If all this sounds too good to be true, let me prove it to you. What do we learn from Abraham, the forefather of our faith? Abraham wasn't chosen as the forefather of faith because he was such a good guy. No, it wasn't his obedience, but his trusting Imma that made him special. Like it says in Genesis, "Abraham trusted Imma and was given praise for right relationship."<sup>15</sup> Workers are paid wages for working, not given gifts. They earn what they are paid. Abraham didn't try to earn Imma's praise but trusted in her goodness to give it, as a gift, and she did. Imma overshadowed Abraham with right relationship.

King David makes the same point. David calls blessed anyone whose righteousness comes not because of their own good works but because Imma has overwhelmed them with the gift of righteousness in spite of themselves:

Blessing to all who are forgiven!  
 Blessed the one whose sin is hidden by Imma!  
 Blessed the one whose sin Imma forgot to count!  
 Blessing to all who live belonging to Imma!<sup>16</sup>

Does this blessing come because of religious ritual? Does circumcision or baptism or Eucharist convey this blessing? Well, what do we learn from Abraham? When did Abraham receive his blessing? Was it before or after undergoing the ritual act of circumcision? It was before! Before any act, he was chosen for blessing. Before a single good work, Abraham became the forefather of all faith.

The ritual was a sign of this blessing and a seal—like a beloved's kiss—that Imma's righteousness had been conveyed—no "Take Backs!" When Abraham, through circumcision, received Imma's kiss that conveyed righteousness to him for all time, he really hadn't done anything for her, not yet. Only after the ritual did Abraham walk according to this truth of Imma's love for him. In doing so he became the role model and exemplar for everyone: for those who have never known nor loved Imma and for those who have always known and always loved her. Abraham is the forefather of faith for those who

learn to trust later in life and for those who walk in Imma's trust throughout their life. Abraham shows us that Imma's righteousness comes to all, for it is for all and to all. And it comes as we learn to trust—like Abraham did.

*More than believing  
 Faithing, trusting, devoting  
 Overwhelmed and overshadowed*

God, it's me. I get it. You got this. I don't have to prove anything. So why do I keep trying to make myself look good? I know I'm not fooling you. I'm not even fooling myself. This "trusting you" thing is harder than it looks. Every time I open myself to you, I am tempted to close myself off. Living as chosen and beloved requires such focus and attention! I'll keep trying to let go and let you lead.

### **Romans 4:13-17a**

Abba's promise to Abraham and his family—to all generations of Abraham's family—is that he would bless the entire earth through him and his children and grandchildren to the Nth generation.<sup>17</sup> This promise was made four centuries before the covenant was made and the Torah was given to Israel. So the promise came before Abraham even had a chance to be obedient to any sort of rule following. It wasn't Abraham's obedience but his trust that allowed him to receive Abba's promise, and with it his righteousness. We can't have it both ways: either we earn Abba's righteousness as a wage for work completed or we receive his righteousness as a gift, a gift he promised to give. Promises are pointless if we know we can build or buy what we want all on our own! What's more, (as we have discussed before), when we try to earn right relationship with Abba, it never works out the way we want. And without laws to follow, we don't break them.

So, what's the bottom line? The bottom line is that Abba's promise comes to us as we learn to trust. Trust is vital so that the promise can be built on the foundation of Abba's gift and guaranteed not only to Abraham and his children and grandchildren but to all who are borne of Abraham-like faith, to the Nth generation! So whether you are good at the whole "obedience thing" or not, the righteousness that we need is Abba's righteousness—the righteousness that overwhelms and engulfs us, that makes us into new creation. And the only way to get his

righteousness is to be like Abraham, who is the father of us all, just like Genesis reminds us:

I made you Daddy to many nations!<sup>18</sup>

*Before I awaken  
God's righteousness arriving  
Breathe the gift to live*

God, it's me. I find myself tired. Exhausted! Trying to look good before others, perform well at work (in the middle of a pandemic). And for my friends with kids, get them through online school while they are "at work." It's all too much, it seems. God how thankful I am I don't need to impress you, too. You see right through me and that's okay. I may not be okay, but I'm alright in the love and mercy of Jesus—woohoo!

#### **Romans 4:17b-23**

Where were we? Oh, I remember now. I was asking, "Who's your daddy?" The answer, of course, is Abraham, who is our spiritual daddy in the presence of Imma. This is the same Imma who gives life to the dead, who looks at what does not yet exist and calls for it to come forth, who sees possibilities and shows them to us, who gives us hope.

Against all hope, Abraham believed Imma who told him he would be the father of many nations. Abraham was an old man, (a hundred years old), and Sarah's womb was barren, (for she was no spring chicken), yet Abraham trusted Imma's promise. Instead of looking at how broken-down his body was, Abraham focused his attention on how Imma was willing and able to make the impossible possible. Abraham gained strength of spirit by clinging to Imma's promise and gave Imma glory because he was absolutely and utterly, fully and completely, without a hint of doubt or waver persuaded she could and would keep her promise. This, friends, is called trust, as it is written,

Abraham was given credit for being in right relationship with Imma.<sup>19</sup>

Now, it's not only Abraham who is given credit for being in right relationship simply by trusting that Imma is a God of promises kept. We, also, are invited into right relationship—in spite of ourselves!—when we extend our

trust to Imma who called Jesus from death to life; who looked at Jesus' empty shell of a corpse and called for it to come forth from the tomb alive, well, and eternal; who both saw the possibilities for eternal life and then showed them to us to give us hope. Jesus descended into death to wage war against sin and then was called to ascend into life to proclaim victory and innocence and restoration.

*Hope dims, dimming, done  
Trusting God in Tomb's shadow  
Life renewing hope*

God, it's me. I'm finding hope difficult, for there is too much suffering and chaos right now. And it's all over the world! I pray that you keep it from descending into my soul. Is hope the cure for "soul suffering"? Does hope clear the chaos or just make it bearable? Or it is you, the God of Hope, who makes chaos bearable? I'll start to contemplate you, rather than some vague notion of "hope," and see if that helps.

#### **Romans 5:1-5**

It's like this: we have been pronounced "Not Guilty!" through simple trust and now have friendship with Imma through our Lord Jesus the Anointed. In Jesus, and by simple trust, we connected with Imma's gift to us. And now we can stand before the Holy One. Not only stand, we boast! We brag! We claim the most audacious hope: one day we will reflect<sup>20</sup> the beauty and image of Imma. Not only this, we also confess we bear the weight of suffering in this world—after the example of Jesus the Anointed. We bear the weight of suffering not because we like to suffer but because we know its fruit: perseverance and maturity, character and integrity, and, finally, hope. The same hope that sustained and guided Father Abraham, is the hope that encourages and directs us even in suffering. It is hope that Imma pours into our hearts through the Divine Spirit, whom Imma has given us as a gift.

*No disappointment  
Hope producing character  
Suffering ones loved*

God, it's me. So I'm not a big fan of suffering but I am a fan of perseverance and character and hope. I guess they are a package deal: living into hope as a

kind of confronting the world's brokenness to discover an abiding wholeness that even pain cannot steal from us. I guess if I trust you for the good things like love, joy, and peace I also need to trust that you will not abandon me when the going gets tough. I'm willing to give it a go, (though I'm still not a big fan of suffering). Where will you send me? Whom can I serve?

### Romans 5:6-11

If all this seems like a bit too much to swallow, as if friendship with Abba and one day reflecting his beauty and image is more than we deserve, it's true. It is more than we deserve, but it's also Abba's joy to give us this gift. You see it's like this: in the pivotal moment in history,<sup>21</sup> when humanity was hopeless to affect change and powerless to confront our sin, in that moment the Anointed One died for those who cared not at all about Abba. It is rare for someone to die for another, though at times someone will give their life to save another—perhaps a good person who seems like they need to be protected. But here is how Abba shows love: Even while we wallowed in sin and brokenness, the Anointed One died that we might live!

So the Good News is that we have friendship with Abba because Jesus gave himself for us. How much more do you think we'll be saved from Abba's resting face, from the justice he requires? If Jesus giving himself for us results in Abba showering us with the gift of loving-kindness and overwhelming us with right relationship, drawing us into his bosom as his beloved, what result will happen because of Jesus' life? If his death changed everything for us, how much more will his life transform the very nature of our existence? It may have sounded a bit arrogant before when I said we boast and brag, but what other choice do we have? Abba has made us friends through Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar!

*Mystery unveiled  
Children of God transforming  
Death gives way to Life*

God, it's me. Friendship with you is almost too much to hope. Perhaps I shouldn't have said that! I am a child of the God of Hope, a fellow heir with Abraham, who showed me what it means to hope. Let me try, try again: Friendship with you may be too much to ask yet

it is gifted to us anyway, beyond my expectation but planted within me as a seed, a seed of hope.

### Romans 5:12-14

This sounds complicated, I know, but it's actually fairly straight-forward. It's like this: as sin, so gift; as death, so life; like Adam, even more so Jesus (and then some).

Sin entered the world through Adam, and death came along for the ride. And, because Adam is the father of all humankind, everybody was influenced; indeed, everybody sinned in some way, shape or form—through commission or omission. Sin, as a power at work to influence us, got to us all and made us stumble. Sin jumped on our back and took a ride even before there was a law, a specific command to “do this and not that.”

This is just a truth: Even between Adam and Moses—between the first human and the first person to receive the Torah with its specific dos and don'ts—everybody fell but no one was held accountable! Why? Because Imma is merciful! The merciful Imma is not about to punish those who fell because they didn't know any better—no law means no punishment, even if the behavior is not what she desires, not what leads to that which is good, just and pleasing.<sup>22</sup> Such folks are not like Adam, who actually disobeyed a direct word from Imma; Adam is an archetype, a foreshadowing of all humanity.

*Sin enters, death comes  
How much more, yes, so much more  
The Gift—grace—brings life!*

God, it's me. Some of my fellow believers focus so much on sin that I can hardly see through the haze to glimpse your gift. Why focus so much on sin and forget the gift? I don't understand their motivation. It seems here that brother Pablo is saying my sin is a kind of short-sighted vision but your gift is the horizon, and the horizon is approaching, it's coming soon, and is here even now if only I have eyes to see it. Imma, help me glimpse your gift in my life!

### Romans 5:15-21

But enough bad news. The gift is different from the sin. The two aren't even close to being in the same league! Many died because of Adam's disobedience, how

much more, how much stronger, how much more pervasive and overwhelming, how much more wondrous is the blessing, the gift of the one man—Jesus the Anointed? His gift overflows to so, so many!

Really, the gift and the sin don't even compare. Adam's one sin brought judgment and condemnation: one sin did all this! But after many sins, even more trespasses, and debts accumulated without forgiving our debtors, the gift came and unwound all the guilt, unraveled all the punishment, and caused all the results of the many sins to be undone. I call this "justification" or being "justified," and it's "just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned," which applies to you, too!

Ponder this (and be ready to have your minds blown, in a good way): if the transgression of Adam brought death, can you even imagine what the obedience of the Anointed One will bring? If a mere "Adam" can bring death, how much more, how abundant, how overwhelming, how over-the-top-you-might-not-believe-it-even-if-you-see-it-with-your-own-eyes will be the gift the Anointed One brings? Right relationships will rule the day! Life will burst forth in new and unforeseen ways, with unimagined possibilities! All this because of Jesus.

So let me summarize for you; give you the bottom-line: one sin = condemnation for all; one life of right relationship with Abba, self, others, and creation = life for all, and it's just-as-if-you'd-never-sinned. Disobedience of the one made many to be sinners; obedience of the One and many will be made right with Abba!

And before I end this part of my letter, let me share with you a sneaky truth: the reason the Torah was given is so that we would be clear when we are breaking it. That is, Abba made sure we humans knew when and how we crossed the line, so we have no excuses nor self-justifications, no alibis for our sin and the justice demanded of us. But not to fear: whenever sin increased, the gift of Abba's love, mercy and right relationship increased even more. Sin can't keep up; it's no match for Abba's gift! So, yeah, sin rules the provincial realm of Death, but Abba's gift rules over the sovereign realm of justice and joy, of his *shalom*<sup>23</sup> that delivers the goods: life made whole and complete and forever through Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar!

*Grace unconquerable  
Overwhelming sin through gift!  
How much more indeed?*

God, it's me. Brother Pablo's reputation for dour and negative doesn't hold much truth, does it? I mean, he sounds more like the Apostle of Overwhelming, Over-the-Top, You-Gotta-See-It-to-Believe-It Good News! Holy One, I cannot express how relieved I am that you are also the Merciful One, and that as much as you desire that I turn away from those things that harm me and bring others harm, even more do you love me and accompany me in the turning away and in the living of a new kind of life.

### **Romans 6:1-14**

Please don't misunderstand me. If it sounds like I'm saying, "Let's sin so the gift may grow even greater!" then you completely miss my point: Never! Sin is dead to us—a stinking, rotting corpse—we have no desire to take it dancing. In fact, through baptism—the sacrament of identity where we are called by our true name, the Beloved of God—we participate spiritually in Jesus' death. We go along for the ride with Jesus into Sheol<sup>24</sup> (spiritually speaking) so that we can also ride with him into the glorious sunrise that is life anew and life abundant, the kind of life only Imma can give. It's like this: connected so intimately with Jesus, we share in his death and also in his life—spiritually participating with him in the journey of death and resurrection; him acting upon us and through us.

What all this means is that our false self—the part that is broken, weighed down by personal baggage, mired in cultural bias, and oppressed by social systems that blind us to our own disease—needs to be destroyed. And that's exactly what Jesus did when he took us along for the ride into Sheol. It's as if our false self was crucified along with Jesus, at least at some level we can only partially comprehend. But, and this is the important part, because we have "died" per se, we are free! Sin cannot hold on to a corpse. Sin cannot influence the spirit relieved from one's corporeal body. Sin can't touch us!

And having "died" with the Anointed One, we know we will also "live" with him, which is really good news for us because Death has zero, absolutely no hold on Jesus. How can it? He already defeated it—went down to Death's home turf and showed it who's boss: he is! He died once, got it over and done with—been there, done that, not going back. Once was all that was necessary. Now Jesus, having been raised to life by Imma, lives forever for her sake. If this is confusing, just contemplate this: you are dead to sin,

so act like it. Even more, you are alive in Imma, so live like it. Remember your true name is Beloved of God; be who you are.

*Our sin crucified  
Sharing union with Jesus  
Freedom, newness, life*

God, it's me. This reminds me of when I was little. I would get scared lying in bed alone, in the dark. My clothes in the closet looked like people, and I wondered what was beneath my bed. Then my mom or dad would check on me, and I knew I wasn't alone. I was no longer afraid. There's power in being with someone or knowing someone is with me. I kind of feel like this is what baptism really is: the assurance that you with us always, and we are always with you—united forever through a bond made unbreakable through the Divine Spirit. Thank you!

#### **Romans 6:15-23**

Again, don't misunderstand me. Just because God's gift of love, mercy, and right relationship overwhelms us, surrounds us, and flows through us is no reason to sin. Never! The rule breaking that comes from the Torah may not have hold over us anymore but that's no justification for ignoring the rhythms of the God-life. If you dance to clunky, tone-deaf, music with an awkward beat it will show. If you sell yourself to the highest bidder, that one will own a part of your soul, and it will show. If you offer devotion and service to brokenness it can only lead to one place: Death!

But thanks be to Abba—there is another way, the path of obedient faith that leads to right relationships with Abba, others, and the creation itself! Instead of an awkward beat that feels clunky, the rhythms of the God-life radiate from deep within, from the depths of our heart. These God-rhythms are what I teach; indeed, what I entrust to you as the sacred Way that leads to freedom pure and perfect. Dance to these God-rhythms and Abba will infuse your entire soul, not just a part of you. Offer yourself in devotion and service to these God-rhythms and it will only lead to one place: Life! You will become your true self.

The way I am speaking is metaphorical, of course. Talk of clunky music and awkward beats versus dancing to God-rhythms is my human way of trying to describe the

ineffable. My point is that the broken path leads to brokenness, to habits of heart and mind that hinder and hamper and, ultimately, degrade and destroy. We all used to walk this path that leads to the false self. But another choice presents itself to us now: the path of healing that leads to our true self.

The wholeness discovered in the God-life is not a single choice but a leaving of one thing to journey toward another; letting go of former habits to grab hold of habits that lead to your true self, to justice and joy, to dancing the God-rhythms. What do you want controlling your soul-journey: sin or gift? Don't trust habits that harm right relationships when the sacred path that leads to healing and wholeness sets you apart for the God-life. Death is the wage you have earned, and it's not what you want—trust me. Much to be preferred is Abba's free gift of life made whole and complete forever in Jesus the Anointed, who is also sovereign above Caesar.

*"Preferred" not enough  
Longing so intense it hurts  
Yearn, thirst, ache for grace*

God, it's me. I'm not much of a dancer—never have been. But this is a different kind of rhythm that Pablo is talking about, right? This is the rhythm of love and longing so deep I am compelled to pray and to speak and to act in service of all things just and good. This is the rhythm that makes my heart beat a little quicker and a lot louder, that helps me see pain and suffering in the world and not look away, that makes me want to care and crave connection for the sake of your Name. O God, teach me to dance!

#### **Romans 7:1-6**

So the issue for all you good, religious folk is the Torah—you don't want to get crossways with following all the rules that, you think, make you good. I understand your concern but want to suggest, respectfully, that your concern is unmerited and perhaps misguided.

"Obedience makes good" only applies to the living! For example, in the male-dominated culture in which we live, what is known as Patriarchy, a married woman belongs to her husband as long as he is alive. But even in the patriarchal era in which we live, a woman is set free from her husband if he dies. She will be called all sorts

of names if she remarries another while her husband is alive but not if he dies!

In a similar way, just like I described a little while ago, you are dead to the Torah in Jesus the Anointed. You no longer belong to the Torah! “The Torah” (to continue the analogy), is no longer your “husband.” Do you remember? You have been crucified with Jesus and raised with him so that you can bear fruit for Imma!

In our past, we were living according to our false self, with its deceptions and lies, its broken impulses enflamed by the Torah, so it is no wonder that we were skilled in bringing death and destruction to ourselves and the communities in which we live and move and have our being. But now that we are free to live into the wellness Torah teaches, we no longer feel compelled to walk along destructive paths, no longer do urges distort our ability to see and hear, know and act in unity with the new life Imma’s Divine Spirit has created, is creating, and will create.

Law’s demise in death  
No longer holding accounts  
Free for Spirit-life

*God’s, it’s me. I am glad Pablo explained his example because he sounds really sexist sometimes. But I get it—different rules for a different era. And he makes his point: I won’t find meaning through rules. I can’t find meaning through rules because I’ll always break at least one. I can, however, find meaning through the new life Jesus creates—life that moves me beyond old rules to new relationship with you, others, and the creation, even a new relationship with myself!*

### **Romans 7:7-13**

Again, don’t misunderstand me. Some people think I am saying the Torah is sinful. Never! In fact, I am thankful for the Torah. How else would I have known about sin? How else would I have known about, say, coveting, were it not for Torah? Torah taught me I shouldn’t covet my neighbor’s goods, but then my false self seized an opportunity to lead me toward all sorts of covetousness. I knew it was wrong because of the Torah, but I couldn’t help myself. Sin used the very words of the Torah to tantalize and tempt me, distorting my very desire.

If I had followed the Torah, I would have lived. I was alive before the Torah, but then dead when it came and sin used it to turn me upside-down and inside-out. Sin took what is good and just and beautiful in Abba’s sight and made me want to ignore and spoil it and see it as ugly in my sight. This is how utterly perverse sin is: it used that which is good to do all this! So again, don’t misunderstand me. That which is good didn’t lead me into spiritual death, but that which is utterly perverse used that which is good to lead me into spiritual death.

How “wack” is that?

Opportunity  
Seized by sin to strangle me  
Distorting my life

*God, it’s me. I don’t want to believe this is true. I want to believe I am better than this, that I choose well and do what is just and good and leads to right relationships. But in truth some of my relationships are broken. Some of my thoughts, my actions, my choices...well, things don’t always go as I want. At night when I’m alone, I can be honest about it—the truth about myself. And when I am honest, I feel the Spirit begin to move. I choose to say, “No,” to that which distorts and perverts, or at least try.*

### **Romans 7:14-25**

The problem is not the Torah but me! The Torah is spiritual and life-giving, guiding toward what is just and good but my false self distorts and perverts everything because of sin! Oh, I hate it!!! I don’t understand what I am doing sometimes. I want to do what is good and just and then wind up doing something I hate.

Now there is this: If I—in my true self, my deepest sense of being Imma’s beloved, fully connected to Imma—do something that I don’t want to do, then I’m really saying the Torah is good. In fact, it’s kind of like—really, almost exactly like—it’s not really me who is doing it, the thing I hate, but it’s the sin that lives and moves and has its being within me that’s doing it.

I know my false self is broken, even at my best there are fractures. I want to do what is just and good and leads to right relationships, but my false self prevents me. I don’t end up doing what is just and good and leads to right relationships; instead, it’s just the opposite, for I end up

doing what leads to brokenness in me and in all. So that's why I say it's kind of like—even almost completely like—it's not “me” who does what is evil but the sin living and moving and having its being within me.

I find that when my true self wants to do justice and love kindness, evil lurks around the corner, ready to pounce. My true self frolics in joy when I ponder Imma's will, but my delight turns into defeat when I try to battle, on my own, the power of sin at work within me. O what sadness! O what despair! It's like I am chained to a rotting corpse—my own, false self! Who will rescue me from physical and spiritual death? Thanks be to Imma through Jesus the Anointed!

So here is the bottom line: with my true self I serve Imma, but with my false self I serve sin.

Sin warping my soul  
True self breaking free of chains  
Thanks be to Imma!

God, it's me. It's soooo me! Yes, to the actions I don't want, the words I shouldn't say. No, to the actions I do want, the word I should say. It shouldn't be so difficult to live the new life of the Spirit, so I don't know why I do the things I do. The notion that I am chained to sin, chained to a past I cannot change—yeah, that sounds right. It also sounds like Pablo is not finished with the story. I want to know what comes next. I need to know more about how to live into my true self! Oh, Imma, break the chains that hold me back!

#### **Romans 8:1-4**

We who live in Jesus the Anointed are squeaky clean—no judgment comes our way, at least not from Abba. It's like this: the rules for right living that come from the Torah don't have the Divine Spirit empowering them, which means we have to try to dance to God-rhythms with our own strength, and none of us are up to the task. However, the rules for right living that come from the Spirit have God-life giving us a push, energizing us, revealing possibilities and powers we didn't know existed. With the Spirit's help, dancing to God-rhythms becomes a real possibility and then a practice and then a habit. Instead of the brokenness that leads to death we can walk the path that, through Jesus and because of his victory over sin,

death, and the powers and principalities of darkness, leads to life. The Cross of Jesus was the great struggle of eternity, with the powers and principalities all allied against him, seeking to get his heart to turn inward—even the smallest bit. And what happened? Jesus' heart remained curved outward toward all humankind and beyond us to all creation and beyond all creation to the entire cosmos. Jesus defeated sin, death, and the powers that we might walk into the God-life with joy in our hearts and justice in our hands.

*Jesus on the Cross  
Battle for eternity  
His heart curved outward*

God, it's me. I grew up thinking of Jesus' Cross in transactional ways—as a contract: he dies, I live. Yet Pablo is bringing something new—a struggle for eternity, a contest of wills, with eternity to the victor. How thankful I am that Christ was the Victor!<sup>25</sup> The energy, enthusiasm, imagination, and love that comes from Jesus gives me hope that my life is not just about following right rules but about connecting with Jesus and having Jesus live in me and through me. Whoa...mind officially blown!

#### **Romans 8:5-17a**

Where we look is what we see. If we look to the horizon, we will travel in that direction. If the horizon is a mirage, asphalt distorted by summer heat, we won't like what we see. (I am using a human analogy, of course.) If we set our minds on injustice and our hearts on immorality, what we see is what we'll get. And it can only lead to hostility to the God-life, which will seem foolish to anyone looking to a distorted horizon.

But if the horizon upon which we gaze is the true beauty of the land—purple mountains majesty and amber waves of grain (again, I am using a human analogy)—then what we look upon will seem beautiful in our eyes. If we set our minds on justice and our hearts on compassion, what we see is what we'll get. And dancing to God-rhythms will be both possible and bring joy—yes, much joy, both to ourselves and, more importantly, to Imma.

You do not live as your false self, my beloved, but as your true self through the life the Divine Spirit causes to live within you. Anyone and everyone with the Spirit of Jesus alive within them belongs to Imma—who invites us to

dance and invites others to join in, too. For anyone and everyone who belongs to Imma, their false self is dead because of sin's handiwork within them, but no worries! Their true self is alive because the Divine Spirit infuses them with the God-life—leading them to dance the joy of the Divine Love with all whom they encounter.

So again, my siblings in Christ, I remind us of the gift in which we live and move and have our being; therefore, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Divine Spirit. We don't owe a debt to our false self, which leads to distortion and destruction of body and soul. Never! Instead, we owe a debt to the Spirit that causes our true self to live, and not only live but thrive. This is how great a debt we owe: we are called God's children, Imma's pride and joy!

Thus, we are no longer cogs on life's assembly lines, afraid to speak our mind, unable and unwilling to act with autonomy. No, we are children of Imma's household—adopted children no less, which is to say personally chosen, carried home in her arms, and given a room in which to abide, with many others as our playmates. When we cry out, "Imma!" we are heard in her bosom. The Divine Spirit is proof! Imma whispers truth and blessing to our human spirit that says, "You belong to the Holy One from whom no one can take you away. You, too, are a child of the Eternal One and so you are Jesus' kid sibling."

How cool is that?

*Horizon in view  
Seeing beauty or distortion  
Choose justice and joy*

God, it's me. My heart sings when I hear that I belong to the Holy, Eternal One. I feel the Spirit living within me as I ponder the beauty of this truth: I am a beloved child! And yet I know my elation will leave me in the hustle-bustle of my busy life. Is this why Pablo makes such a big deal about "the vision thing," about where I look with my mind and heart? Imma, give me eyes to see, with both mind and heart, that which energizes the God-life within me. Help me to dance the dance of Divine Love with all whom I encounter today.

## Romans 8:17b-25a

Before I get ahead of myself as to the wonder and joy of belonging to Abba, know, also, that belonging to Abba comes at a cost: there is suffering in this world, and he is set on doing something about it. As Jesus immersed into death, and we followed him spiritually into the depths, so also did Jesus immerse into suffering, and we who follow him will likewise follow him in embracing those who suffer. We can't want the glory if we are not willing to share the cross; that is not the rhythm of the God-life.

There's really no comparison between the sufferings of here and now and the radiance to be revealed in us in the fullness of all things. The creation itself has been asked to wait—to wait and to hope—while Abba's work in, for, and through us takes its time, simmering like a scrumptious stew. The creation is eager for Abba to finish his work, for the joyful feast to be completed, because the creation also shares in our brokenness, distortion, and decay, for it was joined together with us in our folly—as we go so goes the creation.

And it goes in both directions: not only brokenness but wholeness, not only distortion but clarity, not only decay but radiant growth leading to perfection. And the creation knows that when Imma's work in, for and through us is fully accomplished, it also will be made new creation. Until then, it's like the creation is in labor, straining to bring forth new life. And not only the creation, we also are in labor: through struggle and in hope awaiting the God-life to be borne in, for and through us so the adoption papers can be signed, sealed and delivered to the Courthouse (again, this is a human analogy).

This hope, that we will be adopted into Abba's household for eternity, is the same hope to which Abraham clung and all of Abraham's children, as such we are. It is Abba's salvation being birthed within us. And, like Abraham, we hope for that which we do not see; (otherwise it would not be called hope.)

*Labor pains groaning  
Hope hanging by merest thread  
New Creation's birth*

God, it's me. He did it again. Pablo that is. In one breath he's talking about "New Life—yay!" In the next breath he talks about "Suffering and pain, too!" I wish he would get his story straight! Or is it that

life is not a straight path but a meandering journey, filled with detours, climbing mountains for a beautiful vista then getting lost in the forest on the valley floor? I know Pablo's right about life: I am not who I want to be. I am not who I will be. I am who you are making me to be in Jesus the Anointed, and until you are finished, I wait in hope.

### **Romans 8:25b-30**

While we wait with patience for our adoption—that is, hope for the God-life to be fully birthed in, for, and through us—we do so knowing that this is difficult work, and we need Imma's help. Therefore, Imma sends the Divine Spirit to help us when we are weak, especially when our hope wanes because of suffering. The Spirit teaches us how to pray. And when we cannot pray, the Spirit prays for us! The Spirit blows through us as if playing the trumpet—great shouts of joy! And then blows through us as if playing the bassoon—deep and somber tones of lament. And Imma is well versed in translating these melodies into courage and wisdom, comfort and will. Imma and the Divine Spirit speak a language only they understand, and it's always a blessing to Imma's children, always conforms to that which is good and pleasing and makes us whole.

Of this we can all be most confident: in all things great and small, Imma is at work to bring good. Not that all things are good! But Imma is at work even in the midst of suffering and tragedy—yes, even there and, perhaps, especially there—to turn tragedy toward transformation. This is especially true for all who are called to live the God-life and do God-work, to participate in the healing of the nations and end the creation's long and eager waiting.

Those whom Imma knew from before time began, she chose and called to her bosom that through her love we would be poured into a Jesus-like mold, for Imma wants a huge family, all playing together the harmonies of heaven. And those whom she chose and called to her bosom, she proclaimed, "Innocent!" And those whom she proclaimed innocent she bestowed upon them a radiance that will continue until after the end of all things.

*Radiance birthing  
Deep speaks to Deep in prayer  
Hearing Imma's call*

God, it's me. It almost pains me to consider the beauty of God's love for all creation, including me! How majestic the mercy that invites me to dance to God-rhythms! I am led to wonder and to awe. And in this place of wonder, I am prepared to revisit what Pablo says about suffering. As Jesus walked into the depths of people's pain, it is not too much for me to journey likewise, to embrace and to share, to live with compassion and to seek justice, and to do so knowing some will not approve. As one chosen and called by you, how can I do anything less?

### **Romans 8:31-39**

What else can I say that I haven't already said? If Abba works on our behalf, does it matter who stands against us? Abba did not keep Jesus in heaven by his side but freely sent him into the world to work on our behalf. Is there anything Abba won't do to work on our behalf?

We worried earlier about sin and brokenness and death. We worried earlier about the fact we do the things we hate and ignore everything that leads to light, life and love. Who, then, will bring judgment against us? We are chosen and called by Abba! He himself has proclaimed us, "Innocent!" Is there someone who dares condemn us?

Only Jesus the Anointed stands in a position to judge. Only Jesus has proven worthy of heaven's seat to declare life and death. And Jesus died on our behalf. Jesus was raised by Abba's power. Jesus sits next to Abba's Throne in heaven. Jesus whispers in Abba's ear on our behalf. Will Jesus pronounce judgment against us? Never!

Who could possibly keep Jesus from loving us? What could keep us from Jesus' loving embrace? Neither suffering nor malice, neither intentional cruelty nor accidental tragedy, neither the pangs of hunger nor the deprivations of a collapsed economy, not any dagger nor any danger. The Psalmist said it well, "For Abba's sake we are like sheep, even in death."<sup>26</sup> [You've been putting these in their own line, so you might want to do that here, for consistency's sake]

At the end of the day (and the end of time itself), it's like this: in anything and everything, in ways both grand and insignificant, we are more than overcomers through Jesus the Anointed who loved us with his very self. I am confident to the point of assurance that neither our ending nor our beginning, neither heavenly host nor hellish ghouls, neither things that are nor things that will be,

neither things in highest heaven nor things in the deepest pit, not anything in all creation that has ever been, is now, or ever will be is capable of keeping Abba from loving us through Jesus the Anointed!

*Symphony of love  
Singing to all creation  
Endless harmonies*

God, it's me. You had me at "What else can I say?" You had me at "Abba works on our behalf." That "Jesus whispers in Abba's ear on our behalf" is almost too much. I might just burst! This is the culmination of Pablo's argument, isn't it? This is where he's been heading all along. All his talk about sin and death and gift and life was heading toward this symphony of love. This is Pablo's Good News: in life and in death, in body and in soul, we belong not to ourselves but to our faithful savior, even Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Romans 9:1-5**

So I need to tell you about the great sorrow in my heart, anguish even, bordering on despair. It's because of the Israelites—my people, my beloved. Imma can bear witness, as will both Jesus and the Divine Spirit, too: I wish I could carry their burden, allow the weight of their guilt to sink me into the depths of the ocean, if only they could know the fulness of the God-life found in Jesus the Anointed.

These, my beloved, my own flesh and blood, have so much! They were adopted as Imma's own kids, given the honor to reflect Imma's radiance, entrusted with sacred relationship—as if Imma had proposed—and then shown the way to live into that which is just and good and leads to right relationships. Their lives—indeed, their entire culture and history as a people—is built on blessed role models like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. For goodness' sake, from them came Jesus the Anointed, who is above all and over all and blessed forever! Yes, they are most blessed—always have been! So be it!

*Blessed to be blessing  
Beauty, mercy beyond words  
Grief! Sorrow! Anguish!*

God, it's me. The beautiful story of Patriarchs and Matriarchs, of the prophets and sages of Israel, it is humanity at our most authentic. In their history is a part of my identity, and for them I am thankful. I can't quite muster Pablo's anguish but glimpse it as a distant mirage. I only wish the trust I have in Jesus could be experienced by them and, really, by all. Yet I trust also that Jesus' story is not finished doing its own work of creating beauty in this world. I'll withhold judgment for the sake of wonder, at least for now.

#### **Romans 9:6-18**

And yet something went awry, though let's be clear Abba did not fail. To be a true Israelite is more than genetics, more than heritage and history dating back thousands of years to great-grandpappy Abraham. No, to be one of Father Abraham's kids requires the obedient trust we have discussed before. Abraham had a son, Ishmael, born of the maid servant Hagar, but it was Isaac, you will recall, who was the child of Abba's promise. Isaac was a child born rather late in Sarah's life, when she was well beyond the age of childbearing. The miracle of Isaac is not about an old woman having a baby but about the God who promised a child to parents well beyond their ability to conceive:

A year from now, when I return, you will have delivered a son into the world.<sup>28</sup>

Something just as sacred and mysterious happened with Isaac and Rebekah, who conceived twins. While still in the womb, Abba chose the younger over the elder, chose Jacob over Esau, against every cultural custom of the day. Why did Abba choose Jacob? So all the world would know that blessing isn't about being the oldest or strongest or fastest or smartest but about Abba. Abba has a design and wants it understood clearly—his purpose alone directs blessing to the four corners of the earth. Blessing did not come to Jacob by the customary, culturally accepted means of the elder ruling over the younger. Instead, blessing came because Abba chose the younger, as the Scripture says,

I invited Jacob to join me on the journey and left Esau at home hunting rabbits."<sup>29</sup>

Does this sound unfair to you? Is Abba playing favorites unjustly? Never! For he says to Moses,

It's all about mercy—my mercy. People need to know that only my compassion heals and saves, so I give it as a gift.<sup>30</sup>

Abba proclaims the truth that it is not our utility but his ability that brings life, not what we do but what Abba has already done. Even to the great Pharaoh did Abba remind,

I gave you power to show my purpose; beyond your greatness my goodness, beyond your grandeur my glory will be made known to all the earth.<sup>31</sup>

Abba chooses those upon whom to shower mercy and without his mercy, hearts remain hard like stone.

*Hardened hearts of stone  
There but for the grace of God...  
Go I and go all*

God, it's me. To be honest, I'm not sure about the mechanics of mercy and less sure I need to know. More certain am I about my need for mercy; confident am I that without your mercy I would be lost and without hope in this world. So maybe it's okay that I don't understand the mechanics of mercy—who receives it and who doesn't. Or is it that all receive mercy and only some embrace it? Certain I don't know, not sure I need to care, confident I am thankful, I remain your Beloved Child.

### **Romans 9:19-33**

You might be thinking, “Imma seems so unfair! Who can resist the full force and persuasion of the Almighty?” To which I respond, “Really, human, do you want to argue with Imma? Do you, the clay, want to direct the potter? Do you intend to order the potter to make you into an elegant vase instead of a simple bowl?”

What if Imma's willingness to show her anger was blunted by an even greater willingness to be patient and endure the indignity of the clay making demands of the potter? What if, when Imma finally relented and allowed her anger to be unleashed, it was as we discussed before: a great relinquishment, a letting go and handing us over to

our own choices?<sup>32</sup> What if all this was so that, ultimately, we would come to our senses—begin to see the jaw-dropping beauty of Imma's mercy, the tenderness of heart that is matched only by the firmness of her steely-will? What if all this was planned in the mind of the Eternal One from before the beginning of time so that we might reflect the divine radiance until after the end of all things and then beyond? And what if, contrary to all our assumptions about how Imma's plan would unfold, the divine mercy was intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive?

As Imma's divine plan unfolded, mercy was its heart, as we hear in the truth-tellers from ages past.<sup>33</sup> Hosea says,

Though I have exacted punishment upon Israel for her sins, yet will she be called ‘Beloved.’ Even in the place of exile shall she hear her name called ‘Children of the Living God.’

And Isaiah says,

Israel will return only a few to the Land but a few indeed will return. For Imma, who once used Assyria as a bludgeon to bring Israel to repentance, will overcome the Assyrians and restore Imma's people to the vineyard.

And Isaiah again,

If Imma had not reached out her hand to protect us, we would have been destroyed: like Sodom and like Gomorrah we would have been no more, without hope of restoration.

So what can we say about all this? The outsiders didn't care about seeking goodness and justice and right relationships and yet have had all of these bestowed upon them; indeed, infused within them by God through their trust. Meanwhile, the insiders—the Religious—who cared enough to strive and to seek perfection came up short because they focused on themselves and what they did rather than look to that which Imma was more than willing to do for them. And so they stubbed their toes. It's like the Psalmist said,

Look! The Lord lays the foundation of truth in Zion: a stone of justice and right relationships. Don't stub your toe, fall, and be a laughingstock!

*Mercy drips with blood  
Retribution leading to  
our restoration*

God, it's me. I know how these passages have been read throughout the ages: Israel deserved punishment! Christian triumphalism has distorted these passages' meaning, leading to prejudice, pogroms and Holocaust. Imma, in your mercy, forgive me and forgive us. May I never miss the larger context to which Pablo refers: that you, Imma, reached out your hand to protect and to save; that you, Imma, are faithful to your covenant for the sake of your own name. What I hope for myself may I also hope for all.

**Romans 10:1-8a**

Brothers and sisters, my heart craves the Israelites' salvation. From my lips to God's ears, Abba hears my prayers day and night. I know all about them: passionate for the God-life—passionate but misguided. Their enthusiasm for the God-life includes a bit too much of themselves, believing their own goodness can take the place of the goodness Abba can infuse within them. Open to receive goodness as a gift from above or seeking to create goodness as a work of one's own hands—we cannot have it both ways! Seeking to build on the foundation of their own goodness, they built a lovely shack and missed the mighty fortress that Jesus the Anointed offers to all who trust in him with obedient faith.

Moses described the human dilemma like this:

The person who trusts in themselves better have enough giddy-up, or else.<sup>34</sup>

But the person who knows they need help to live into the fullness of the God-life says,

Let's be real: ain't no way to climb high enough to reach Abba nor dig deep enough to follow Jesus into Hades. And the Good News is I don't have to do either of these because Abba is right here with me and he ain't going nowhere!<sup>35</sup>

*My goodness too good  
Deceiving me to believe  
I don't need God's help*

God, it's me. I have been there, done that, bought the t-shirt. I have stood upon the edifice built to my own goodness—and I couldn't see over a six foot fence. I have trumpeted my own rightness—and it sounded like a kazoo. My theology says I am right with you by faith—and my practice proclaims a different Gospel as often as not. Lord, I would love to learn to live the God-rhythms to which Pablo points—and it's harder than it looks. So why do I blame the Israelites because they struggled with the same thing?

**Romans 10:8b-15**

The message we proclaim is one of ultimate trust: expressed through our mouths because words have power; words create truth. And so we declare, "Jesus is Greater than Caesar for Jesus is the true Ruler and Son of Imma!" We believe with the full embrace of our conviction, with our hearts, that God expressed through Jesus the power of New Creation, reversing the old order of death and decay through the second Big Bang: Jesus' resurrection! And so we trust we will be rescued from sin and death—proclaimed by Heaven's Judge, "Friends of Imma!"

This bounty of blessing is not just for Israel but for all, to the four corners of the earth. If you don't believe me, just look at what the Scriptures say:

All who trust in Imma will live in honor!<sup>36</sup>

You know what "all" means, right? It means anyone and everyone: no differences between "us" and "them," nor Imma playing favorites rather than loving on all her children with unbridled (and equal) abandon. It's just like Joel said:

Call on Imma and you will be rescued, for sure: no doubt about it.<sup>37</sup>

Now you know why I am so eager to get the word out about Jesus the Anointed. Why would someone call on Imma if they don't trust in her? Why would someone trust in Imma if they've never been introduced? And how can they be introduced unless we make the introduction? And how can we make the introduction with confidence and even boldness unless we are absolutely certain that Imma has sent us for this purpose. But so we can be assured

Imma has sent us, remember what the truth-teller Isaiah said:

Beautiful in Imma's sight are the feet of those who bring glad tidings; joy springs in Imma's heart at the sound of deliverance shared.<sup>38</sup>

*Beautiful mountains  
Sharing joy, a privilege  
Imma's heart beats proud*

God, it's me. This message is such Good News, so why am I so shy about sharing it? Is it the veneer of judgment that accompanies my way of telling others about Jesus? Is it that I invite others into an "if-then," formulaic perversion of faith? Is it that I have yet to figure out how to convey the beauty of the God-rhythms which beat in my heart? Or, perhaps, is it all of the above? Oh, Imma, sorrow is mine also, and not just felt by Pablo. Teach me, please, the way of holy companionship where spirit shines; the way of sacred journeying that invites people deeper into your love.

### **Romans 10:16-21**

Alas, we now return to the source of my great sorrow and anguish that borders on despair: not all the Israelites accept the Good News about Jesus the Anointed. Isaiah saw this coming when he wrote,

Lord, has anyone believed our message?<sup>39</sup>

(And we know a message is not believed until it is heard, which is why it's so important that we are sent by Abba to tell the message.) But my brothers and sisters in Israel, my beloved, did hear the message—of course they did. Not only did they hear the message, but they understood the message. We know this from all the *TANAKH*:<sup>40</sup>

You are going to be so jealous—I'm going to teach other nations instead of you. Don't blame anyone but yourselves!<sup>41</sup>

The glory of the heavens shines upon all the earth; the work of Abba's hands is heard to the four corners.<sup>42</sup>

The *nations* know me better than you do—my own people! They weren't even paying attention and found me because I showed them my glory. But you, my beloved, ignored my every entreaty.<sup>43</sup>

*Love cannot be forced  
God-life and rescue denied  
Sadness in my soul*

God, it's me. I wish it weren't so. I wish the Israelites had believed the Good News about Jesus. And if I am honest, I feel it more poignantly with my own family and friends—both the joy of their trusting and the sorrow they don't seem to feel the same about Jesus as I do. I can't understand why this is so but know it is. And so, like Pablo, I own my sorrow. I admit my anguish. I confess that I do not quite feel despair, but then I'm not as intense as Pablo. I also suspect Pablo has something up his sleeve he plans to unveil in the next chapter! (Yes, I cheated and read ahead.)

### **Romans 11:1-10**

So it seems to some as if I am saying God rejected his people. Never! I am an Israelite myself, a great-great grandchild of Father Abraham and Mother Sarah, being born of the tribe of Israel's first king, Saul. Imma hasn't rejected her children, her beloved Israel, whom she has known from before the beginning of time. Yes, some have fallen away but does that mean all are rejected? Never! It's like what we read in the story of Elijah, who complained to Imma,<sup>44</sup>

Poor me! I have no friends! I stand for you and others jeer me. I serve you and they hunt me down.

And how did Imma answer?

No tears, little Elijahito, you are not alone. I've got matters well in hand. In the palm of my hand I hold 7,000 who stand for me rather than kneel to Baal.

The present time is much the same: Imma has matters well in hand; only she holds us by gift so that our being held is not something we have earned but something that has been given, and by Imma no less! Otherwise, how could the God-life be a gift?

This is all the first step in a longer journey. Israel tried so hard to show off for Imma, “Mommy! Mommy! Look at us!” All furrowed brow and serious they have been, so serious they forgot to unwrap the gift Imma handed to them. But those whom Imma chose, those called “the elect,” accepted the gift the others ignored. It’s like what the truth-teller Isaiah wrote:<sup>45</sup>

Imma caused them to sleep, deep and sound: sweet bliss of oblivion so they would neither see nor hear what Imma was up to.

Likewise, the Psalmist wrote:<sup>46</sup>

Their own kitchen becomes a cage and their barbeque pit a deep hole into which they fall and cannot climb out. Darkness will fall upon their sight and broken their backs shall be from toil that bears no fruit.

And so we rightly ask of Imma’s plan: If she has not rejected her people, what in heaven’s name is she up to?<sup>47</sup>

*Stubborn beloved  
Enduring sacred time-out  
Darkness falls for now*

God, it’s me. I think I am beginning to understand. Your “rejection” is no rejection at all but a holy handing over of your people to our own obstinacy. We want to do things our way and, by God—literally—you will allow it, if only to demonstrate a better way, a straighter path, one in which we allow you to lead the dance while we follow. I confess I am not a great follower: too much alpha in me, too much privilege, too human. All my life I have worked to be self-sufficient only to discover so late how much I need others. And you.

### **Romans 11:11-16**

So if we accept that Abba has not rejected his beloved, what, then, are we to make of the fact that Israel stumbled and fell—and even more that Abba appears to have tripped them? Have they fallen so hard they can’t get back up? Never!

The genius of Imma’s plan is that, through Israel’s falling away, those from the four corners of the earth, whom we call “Greeks” or “Gentiles,” have heard Jesus’

Story and been intrigued, persuaded, and compelled to journey ever deeper into the God-life. (And I not-so-secretly hope they will be jealous of all the attention the Gentiles are receiving from Abba.)

And Abba’s plan is even more ingenious: if Israel’s falling away means bucket of blessings for all the world, and if Israel’s losing “Preferred Member” status in the God Club means people from the four corners of the earth being elevated to the choicest seats in Abba’s Amen Corner, just imagine how much more, how much greater, how much the flood of his blessing will be when Israel is brought back into his embrace?

I am trying to help you Gentiles understand the things of Abba because I know you haven’t known about the God-life for very long. I am proud of my ministry and hope to use your success in learning to dance to God-rhythms to make my own kinfolk jealous. Perhaps when they see you, they’ll come begging to sing God’s new song. Imagine how this might work: their saying no to Abba brought God’s friendship to all the world so their saying yes to Abba will, no doubt, bring life to the dead! If the first slice of baked bread is worthy of melted butter, the whole loaf is bound to be delicious. If the roots of the tree are healthy, the branches will be lush and green.

*People in the back  
Not forgotten just postponed  
Knowing a new love*

God, it’s me. Jesus was an Israelite—borne of Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Mary—flesh of their flesh. Raised in a culture of the Torah and Sabbath observance, our Lord was also spiritual descendent of this history. Would God throw them on the trash heap of salvation-history? It seems as if I may have taken Christian exceptionalism too far. I assumed that because they don’t love Jesus, that’s the end of their story, yet Pablo seems to be saying you are working to make all things new: them, me, us, and all. Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayer!

### **Romans 11:17-24**

Speaking of the branches of a tree, the Israelites are like branches broken off so that you, the Gentiles, though you are wild, have been grafted into the root, experiencing the deep, nourishing resources of the Mother

Tree. But know this: you are the interlopers, the outsiders welcomed in, so don't pretend you are better or more precious than the broken branches. The Mother Tree supports you and not the other way around—you do not support the Mother Tree. So don't even imagine saying, "Well, I'm here now so that's all that matters!" Never! All that matters is you were added because you trusted Imma. Don't get ahead of yourself—no arrogance or cockiness is deserved. Imma did not act because of you but so that trust can be made the way to wholeness. If Imma was willing to break off some of the branches from her own children Israel, she will be willing to do the same to you.

Imma is crafting a pathway to true wholeness, a pathway that is both kind and stern, both loves beyond our imagining and holds us accountable beyond our desiring. Why? Because Imma is guiding us all toward the way of mercy, and to receive that mercy as a gift, and she offers that gift through Jesus the Anointed. And Imma is able both to break off and graft in, both to take what is wild and make it natural and take what is natural and restore it to its rightful place. The point of all this is to embrace the truth that we are all a part of the Mother Tree not because of who we are but because of what Imma is doing by mercy through the grace discovered, embraced and celebrated in Jesus.

*Mother nourishing  
Broken branches crushing Wind  
Mother nurses new*

God, it's me. I hear Pablo's warning as an invitation to humility. I'm not to presume upon God's mercy, not to assume I am better because I unwrapped the gift known as grace. If I stop trusting, start boasting, start assuming and presuming upon your gift, I will be like all of God's people who have fallen away—lost and left to my own devices, my own cunning and conniving. God, I have been there, done that, and bought the t-shirt. I prefer to remain connected to you. Once again (and anew) Imma, in your mercy, hear my prayer.

### **Romans 11:25-36**

I want you to be humbled to the point of awe by the depths and riches of Abba's mystery—the plan he has been unfolding and will unfold: Israel's minds have been closed and hearts hardened, and, yes, this is the action of

Abba upon them but only for the moment. Only for the moment, Israel must decrease that the Gentiles may increase. Only for the moment, the Good News about the God-life must extend beyond Israel until it reaches to the four corners of the earth, for Abba desires all to dance to God-rhythms and to know the God-life. How can that happen if the God-life is only for Israel? And when the fullness of the Gentiles has been adopted into Abba's family, then, in the fullness of all time, all Israel will embrace the God-life as has always been Abba's plan.

If this seems far-fetched because you look around and see many of Israel—the branches broken off—who seem far away, remember what the truth-tellers Isaiah and Jeremiah wrote,

Abba will send his Anointed to Zion;  
Jacob will be delivered from godlessness.<sup>48</sup>  
I have made a sacred promise with Israel;  
I will take away their sins.<sup>49</sup>

So Israel has been made enemies of the Good News in Jesus so that you Gentiles might have the opportunity to dance to the God-rhythms and find the wholeness that comes from the God-life.

But Abba's sacred promise to Israel remains, or are you saying Abba might renege on his promise? Never! Indeed, Abba is faithful—always!—and Abba promised Father Abraham that all the world would be blessed through him. This promise is bound by something far more powerful than mere words but by the Living Word of Abba, by something far greater than mere blood sacrifice but by the blood spilled by Abba's own Son, Jesus, by something far more permanent than that written on tablets of clay by human hands but by that carved into his heart by the Divine Spirit.

Abba's mysterious plan seeks first Israel and then you, who extend to the four corners. The plan began with your disobedience and has led you to the God-life by mercy through the gift of Jesus. In the same way, the plan has led Israel into disobedience so that, in the fullness of time, they may be led to return to their true home by mercy through the gift discovered, embraced and celebrated in Jesus. It's all about Abba's mercy, all about the gift, all about Jesus—what a great plan, even if it's sometimes difficult to discern in the midst of our daily living.

Oh, how deep the riches;  
how wide the wisdom;

how unsearchable Abba's decisions;  
 how unfathomable Imma's plans;  
 how profound the knowledge of the Living God!<sup>50</sup>

Oh, who can plumb the depths of Abba;  
 who can guide Imma's paths;  
 who can give an abundance Abba must return;  
 who can claim as a right what Imma gives as a gift?<sup>51</sup>

From Abba are all things;  
 through Imma are all things;  
 for Abba are all things;  
 to Imma be all glory forever and ever! Amen!

*All about the gift  
 Given to us and to them  
 Gift for everyone!*

God, it's me. So let me see if I understand Pablo: it took him 11 chapters, approximately 13,000 words, and the bottom line is: "God loves everybody! Let's celebrate!" Okay, to be fair to Pablo, divergent cultures and warring societies, human pride and historical prejudice, literary obfuscation and theological nuance get in the way of our comprehension, so Pablo had to develop a rather complex legal brief (of sorts) to build a case for your mercy. And build it he did: an irresistible argument that you love the Israelites, you love the Gentiles, and you are taking your time to unfold your plan, which will only be revealed completely in the fullness of time. And it is a plan we can trust, for it is founded upon your promise! Sounds good to me.

### **Romans 12:1-2**

What shall we do with Imma's amazing gift?<sup>52</sup> How about this: gaze upon her mercy and then give yourself to it. Ponder Imma's gift and let her lead you to praise and prayer. Let Imma's goodness dwell deep within you—deeper than mind and heart, into the marrow of bone and soul—then express that goodness in ways that bring her joy.

Our culture demands that we be poured into a greed-shaped mold designed for corruption. Never! Instead of being poured into a mold to make you look and act like everyone else, open your mind to Imma's transforming work of soul-shaping. She is quite the artist and will craft you into someone who reveals to the world

that the God-mold is both good and brings joy; indeed, it is the only path to human wholeness.

*Spiritual worship  
 Discovering the good life  
 Transformed through the mind*

God, it's me. This sounds great and not easy. Expressing the good and bringing you joy is what I desire and what our culture is aligned to prevent. Angry voices polarize simple conversations while transactional commerce replaces compassion and justice with "let the buyer beware." What am I to do? And then I hear you whisper, "Discern what you read and to what you listen—feeding the mind shapes the soul."

### **Romans 12:3-8**

Let me expand what I just said. It's not only for yourself alone that we express the God-life but also for each other. Our lives are woven together into a love-shaped tapestry, with humility the thread that binds us, so each of us can be who we are without needing to parade around as our false self. Together we are like the human body: each of us playing our part in supporting one another, having a different role while serving the same purpose, knowing we belong not to ourselves but to Jesus and to one another.

Abba has given each of us a present that has become a part of our true self. To those given the gift of truth-telling, speak the truth in love and with courage, trusting Abba to guide you. To those given the gift of serving, serve with compassion and tenderness. To those given the gift of teaching, bring clarity and inspire conviction in your students even as you continue to learn. To those given the gift of encouragement, may your presence walk beside those who feel as if they are alone. To those given the gift of giving, may your generosity bring abundance where others experience only scarcity. To those given the gift of leadership, may you bring all your people safely through the raging waters. To those given the gift of mercy, may you bring healing even to ancient wounds.

*For each one a gift  
 To be a blessing to all  
 Love's embodiment*

God, it's me. What is my spiritual gift? I know I have some natural abilities, have learned some professional knowledge, and gained some skills over the years. Is my spiritual gift the same thing or something different? I sense within me your Spirit at work, taking abilities, knowledge and skills and composing them into a new song. I sense it is not so much me at work as you at work within, through and beyond me. Grant that what I have received as gift I may share as blessing to others.

### **Romans 12:9-21**

Love is whole and complete only if it presents its true face to others, abhorring evil but basking in all that is good. Show devotion one to another through such love, showering each other with honor and esteem.

Dance to God-rhythms with zest, expressing your zeal through service in Imma's purposes. When hope is required, be joyful. When you feel under attack, be patient. When trust is required, be prayerful. When relating to your beloved, make a habit of generosity. When relating to those whom you do not know, make a habit of hospitality.

When you encounter those who hate you, offer to share with them in sacred goodness from the deepest places of your soul, where perfect love abides. When you encounter those whose joy overflows, join them in thanksgiving. When you encounter those who sorrow, accompany them through the Valley of the Shadow.

Practice unity that lives with humility and express your unity across all human boundaries, for to Imma all our fences are folly. Practice peace that lives against the grain of our culture's mantra of "dog eat dog" and "an eye for an eye." If at all possible, at least as you have any say in it, practice harmony with all.

The Scriptures remind us that we are not the ones to judge—not our job! Never has been, never will be. Remember what Deuteronomy says,

"I got this," says Imma, "It was my honor that was impugned. I'll be the One to respond."<sup>53</sup>

Remember also the Proverb that says,

Feed your hungry enemy; give your thirsty enemy a cold drink. And your enemy will offer in return a

symbol of repentance: a basket of coals upon their head—a way of saying, "Let's be friends!"<sup>54</sup>

Remember: Hate cannot cast out hate—only love can do that.<sup>55</sup>

*Stubborn Love's folly  
Too hopeful to be denied  
By hate and hating*

God, it's me. This sounds like Practical Christianity 101. This sounds like the Way of Jesus personified. This sounds easier said than done and totally worth the doing! So help me walk in the footsteps of St. Francis and Mother Teresa and Dr. King. Make me courageous to endure ridicule for the sake of your righteousness and find joy in the bringing of your justice. And if this is too much to ask for now, if I still need spiritual training wheels before I learn to ride along on the Way of Jesus, maybe just help me not take the bait the next time someone invites me into a political argument.

### **Romans 13:1-5**

We follow Torah of Love as those who do not belong to Caesar but to Abba. Do not let your first allegiance to Abba be maligned simply because you want to thumb your nose at Caesar. Accept Caesar's authority to the extent you can, for human authority is established by Abba, with rulers set in place to preserve the common good. Violating the common good because you say to yourself, "I belong to Abba not Caesar," causes all of his people to be placed under suspicion. It is better simply to do what is right and just and good so there will be nothing to fear from Caesar, and you might even be praised. So accept Caesar's authority whenever you can, so long as it does not violate your conscience.

*God's rule or Caesar's?  
So long as justice abides  
Choosing to obey*

God, it's me. These are difficult times for Romans 13: too much shouting, so many protests. Your people are lining up on both sides, shouting at each other, our "righteousness" on display for all to witness as it is shred to bits. Abba, in your mercy, help me examine my

own conscience first and cast not the first stone, for I live in a glass house. Grant me the serenity to accept laws that should be obeyed, the courage to confront injustice that must be changed, and the wisdom to discern the difference with humility.

### Romans 13:6-10

I know a perennial question among Imma's followers is whether paying taxes causes one to fall into idolatry. I appreciate the zeal of your concern, for taxes are paid with coins bearing a graven image—Caesar's image—and inscribed with false worship—"the Son of Imma." However, the purpose and use of the tax is more important: to serve Imma by preserving the common good. Pay your fair share to any and all—tax for taxes, fee for services, respect and honor whenever they are due to whomever they are due.

Pay all your debts for the sake of love. Torah of Love is the only debt you are to owe, and you owe it to all whom you meet. The Second Tablet commandments<sup>36</sup> about being faithful, protecting people, preserving property, and respecting your neighbor's goods and all other commands that there are can be summarized in this one commandment: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Love protects our neighbor, replacing harm with wellness and care. Thus, love of neighbor brings fulfillment to Torah—love's purpose is filled to bursting.

*Forgive me my debts  
Debts to love and be loving  
Loving all neighbors*

God, it's me. Too often do I live serving my own interests first and then the interests of others. Too easily do I want my neighbors' blessing only so long as it doesn't inconvenience me. Imma, teach me to love as you love. Teach me the first act of love is to pay what is owed: a fair wage for a full-day's work, the ability to care for self and family, a roof over one's head and no fear of getting sick. Imma, is this the kind of love with which you call me to love my neighbors?

### Romans 13:11-14

Loving matters because Abba's *kairos*<sup>37</sup> is near. The hour is at hand for you to get woke, to stop sleepwalking through life, and recognize Abba is restoring wholeness to all. The dark night of hatred is nearly over; a new day of creation is dawning. So lay down the weapons of this world—greed and deceit, abuse of power and position—and wear the armor of light. Behave like all those whom you cherish are watching your every movement—no treating each other like pieces of meat to be used for your own gratification, no debauchery nor decadence nor dissension nor distrust. Never! Instead, clothe yourself with Jesus. Let the mind of Jesus infuse your mind with wisdom, the heart of Jesus overflow your heart with compassion, and the Spirit of Jesus direct you to desire that which is right and just and good.

*Dawn's rising at hand  
Wearing Jesus as a coat  
New creation near*

God, it's me. Pablo's sense of time is almost God-like, his definition of "near" a bit different from my own but conforming to the One for whom a thousand years is like a day. Yet the *kairos* moment is always near, at least for me. The inflection point of my life to be discovered in my next encounter with my neighbor, with a stranger, with those who need the light, life, and love of Jesus expressed by another human being. Abba, by your grace, may I shine that light, share that life, and be that love in human form. May the dawn arise today.

### Romans 14:1-6

Because of the unity we experience in Jesus, it is needful that you express your unity with charity of speech and conduct toward one another, especially when discussing subjects open to debate among people of good conscience.

Take the matter of food, for example. In a pagan culture such as Roman society, meat is often sacrificed to idols. Some people know the idols are not real but mere wood or metal and so they eat meat that has been "offered up" with a clear conscience. Other people seek to act with caution and scrupulosity and so avoid eating meat,

preferring to consume only vegetables. The one who consumes is not greater than the one who does not, but all are accountable to the Lord of the Conscience. Who are you to judge another's relationship with Imma as they seek to serve with faithfulness? Before Imma each of us will stand, and she will make us all capable of standing.

Or as another example, take the matter of "holy days." One person considers the High Holy Days as unique, special, and worthy of extra devotion, while others consider all days as opportunities to express devotion to Imma. Whichever choice is made, it should be made as if presenting an offering, as a gift given to honor Imma. For our devotion, like eating or avoiding meat, is a sign of our love. Whichever choice is made, there should be clarity of conviction in one's own mind, the offering of one's true self in service to Imma's purposes. Whichever choice is made, make it with a heart full of thanksgiving.

*Silly arguments  
Theologically sound  
Argued to the death*

God, it's me. I can hardly believe Pablo felt the need to write about these things—it's laughable! What nonsense! Why couldn't the early Christians argue about important things like the volume of our church music or whether or not to call our minister "Pastor," "Reverend" or just "Steve"? And is anything really a matter "open to debate" these days? I wonder what Pablo would think about our current levels of polarization. Is there a "Word of the Lord" we are to hear?

### **Romans 14:7-12**

We do not belong to ourselves but to Abba and to one another. We live in Abba and die in Abba and belong in all things to Abba—in life and in death. As Jesus died and was raised, so he is sovereign of the living and the dead. So don't even pretend to judge one another because it is Jesus' job, not ours! Certainly do not snub your nose at a sibling in Jesus for the silly reason that their conscience differs from your own on a matter open for debate! Such folly ignores that Jesus is sovereign—to him we will give an answer, not to one another. As the truth-teller Isaiah said in quoting Abba,

Because I live, surely every knee will bow before me and every tongue confess my Name. Each will give an account but not to one another; all will account for themselves before me.<sup>38</sup>

*Judge not lest ye be  
Found doing a job beyond  
Your rank and pay grade*

God, it's me. I like the first part of this verse: belonging to Abba, chosen from before the beginning of time, being held until after the end of all things. It's the second half of the verse that gives me pause: having to give an account for my actions and attitudes, having to explain the callous word and lack of compassion. It causes me to wonder if I truly believe in forgiveness and mercy?

### **Romans 14:13-23**

Judging one another only leads to bickering. Even if you believe it is justified, for it is allegedly "spiritual bickering." Nonsense! Bickering is bickering and does not build up. Decide today to build each other up rather than cause each other to fall. I am absolutely convinced, beyond a shadow of doubt, that such matters are not as simple and obvious as we assume—nothing is pure or impure in its own right. Rather our conscience directs us in matters open for debate, making issues pure or impure, either "Right and just and good" or simply "Wrong, wrong, wrong!" Obey your conscience, and it will lead you toward wholeness.

But in obeying of your own conscience, take care not to harm or destroy one for whom Jesus died. If your sibling in Jesus is distressed to see you eat meat offered up to an idol, don't eat in front of them (and this principle goes for a host of other things). Charity before liberty: our liberty should not be inflicted upon another with an absence of charity. Speak and live into the just and good as best as you are able, knowing Imma's family lives for reasons beyond food and drink but for right relationships and reconciliation and the joy of dancing to God-rhythms. If you live into the God-life in these ways, you will bring joy to Imma's heart and people will like you, too.

So here is the bottom-line for living in community as Imma's beloved family: work toward reconciliation and right relationships, build up rather than tear down, don't sweat the small stuff, especially if it creates harm or destroys

Imma's will in the world. Eat meat (or not), drink wine (or not), just do everything in a way that expresses love toward your brother or sister.

Keep your opinion to yourself more often as not; and if you have to get something off your chest, tell it to Imma, who is always listening. Blessed you will be as you live in peace with your conscience, knowing the Divine Spirit of wisdom and truth directs your path. And if you cannot live in peace with your own conscience, your decisions will be borne of your own brokenness.

*Love over freedom  
Conscience expressed by loving  
Submission to God*

God, it's me. My goodness! The world needs more charity and love these days. Wherever I look I see the carnage of liberty being preferred over love. People are literally dying because we cannot find it within ourselves to submit in humility for the sake of healing wounds—physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. Imma, forgive me my participation in this problem, and help me be part of the solution. Give me the serenity to accept the opinions I cannot change, the courage to speak the opinions I must in good conscience speak, and the wisdom to know the difference.

### **Romans 15:1-13**

Care for each other amidst failures and falling down so that no one falls away. Let those strong in trusting Abba support those who need encouragement. Care about each other's blessing and strengthen each other's trust. Follow the example of Jesus who did not serve himself but "endured ridicule for others' sake," as is written in the Psalms.<sup>59</sup> Everything in the Scriptures is intended to support us and encourage us to endure in trust of Abba, even in difficult times, and to provide hope amidst life's trials and tragedies. May Abba give to you the same mind that was in Jesus, that all y'all may be a heavenly choir whose song resounds in praise and reflects Abba's beauty and majesty.

This is the song Abba longs to hear from you all as you are gathered in one voice: a song of acceptance—Israelites loving Gentiles; a song of faithfulness—rejoicing in the many ways Abba's promise to Father Abraham is being fulfilled; a song of tender joy at the way Abba's mercies are

new every morning and have drawn the Gentiles into her loving embrace. This is the same song that has been sung from long ago, as written in Scripture:

Even the Gentiles will hear my praise;  
the song I sing will ring in their ears forever.<sup>60</sup>  
Rejoice, Gentiles, sing along with Israel!<sup>61</sup>  
Praise Abba, Gentiles, let the birds hear your voice!<sup>62</sup>

The truth-teller Isaiah also sang this song:

The Root of Jesse sprouts branches;  
the birds of the air will join the chorus of the nations;  
the Gentiles will bow down to be lifted up;  
the hope of the world will be known by all.<sup>63</sup>

May the Hope of the World fill you with joy head to toe. May Abba's peace overwhelm your, heart and mind, soul and spirit. May his hope overshadow your whole being that God-life will flow through you always.

*Singing a new song  
The Nations are rejoicing  
Hope overflows all*

God, it's me. The unity to which you call us shames me, for I have participated in division, in divisiveness, in helping the Cause of Christ to be diminished in the eyes of all. Kyrie eleison! Christe Eleison! Kyrie eleison!<sup>64</sup> In the place of division may I seek to accept and to affirm, to encourage and to engage in robust dialogue, even debate, but always in the spirit of love that reflects Jesus to the world.

### **Romans 15:14-33**

Please believe I am confident that you Romans overflow with goodness and Imma's gift of love and mercy. I trust your insight and ability to teach each other. I have written boldly on certain matters because Imma has gifted me to be the sent one to the Gentiles. I have written boldly even as I am aware you understand these things—my boldness reminds you of what you already know. Imma has infused me with her Divine Spirit and given me the sacred privilege of speaking Good News and helping the Gentiles to become a living sacrifice, an offering to bring Imma joy,

poured out as a vessel as the Spirit works upon them and through them.

I relish the work Imma has given me, for it reflects her goodness and gift back into the world. I have absolutely nothing to brag about, for it is only as Jesus the Anointed works upon me and through me that others come to obedient trust, experience awe-filled wonder, and display the ability to love with a love beyond their own strength—love initiated and infused by the Divine Spirit.

I have been speaking Good News from Jerusalem to Albania,<sup>65</sup> giving it my full energy, intelligence, imagination and love.<sup>66</sup> And my dream, my life's ambition, is to speak Good News wherever Jesus' life story has never been told. Call it ego, but I never want to build on someone else's foundation. Instead, I prefer to be the one who, in the words of the truth-teller Isaiah, is used by Imma to extend the dream to others:

The deaf will hear and the blind will see;  
understanding will ascend to the heights.<sup>67</sup>

I have not yet made it to Rome because there has been so much work from Israel to Albania, but now the time has come for me to journey to you. I want to abide with you all—which has been my heart's longing for many years—and then have you send me on to Spain, to speak Good News to those who have not heard the Story.

Right now, I am journeying to Jerusalem with financial support from the beloved in Greece, from the Macedonians in the north and the Achaïans on the northern tip of the southern Peloponnese. They experienced joy in giving to the poor among the beloved in Jerusalem, for they understand the Israelites are their elder siblings in Jesus, to whom they owe a debt of gratitude for having received the spiritual blessings of Father Abraham, which come through the Israelites to all. As these in Israel shared spiritual blessing, so the Greeks and others share material blessing, as is appropriate and just. Once I deliver this support to our brothers and sisters, and after I abide with them in fellowship for a time, my intention is to journey to you, to Rome, where I am fully confident you will receive me with blessing, and I will be blessed.

I desire your companionship in my spirit on my journey to you. In the name of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, and by the love of the Divine Spirit, I ask y'all to pray to Imma on my behalf. Pray for my safety against those who would stand against my work. Pray the financial support I carry would be delivered and received

with joy. Pray with joy that God's perfect purpose would encircle us all that we might discover new energy, fresh imagination, and rejuvenation of bodily strength. May Imma's peace sink into the marrow of your soul!

*Longing for new home  
Journey of faith propelling  
Must. Tell. The. Story.*

God, it's me. I was worried, quite honestly, when first I began to read Pablo's letter. I was worried about his reputation for being harsh in search of the holy; his repete for complicated arguments that make difficult what should be simple and which obscure what should be revealed. I confess, Abba, my mind has changed about Pablo—he has become a brother. I admit also that my heart has changed—a brother whom I love. May the Good News Pablo has taught live deep within me, and as he once prayed so now do I: may your peace sink into the marrow of my soul!

### **Romans 16:1-27**

Now that I am at the end of my message to you, and as is our custom when writing letters, I bring greetings. I greet all of my many friends among you; indeed, you are more than friends but beloved, fellow workers in the blessed work of bringing Good News into the world.

Among my beloved are Phoebe—her work as a Deacon<sup>68</sup> in the gathering of Imma's saints in Cenchreae is worthy of commendation. I ask you to welcome her as if you are welcoming me and to support her work among you as if you are supporting me. She serves Imma faithfully.

Among my beloved are Junia and her husband Andronicus, who both are like me in having been imprisoned for speaking the Good News of Jesus. They are both sent ones of Jesus<sup>69</sup> and have served him for many years, even before I became a sent one myself.

Among my beloved are Pricilla and Aquila, who are my co-workers in telling the Story. They have risked their lives to speak the Good News of Jesus among the Gentiles, and all the gatherings of saints are grateful for their courage, compassion, and constancy. Indeed, even now they open their home to a gathering of saints, and I ask you to greet all the gathered in their home.

My beloved are almost too numerous to name—though Abba knows them by name—and I rejoice that they

come from among both Israelites and Gentiles, that they are all people, that they have demonstrated their obedient trust through tenacious loving, courageous compassion, and by work that fatigues the body while enriching the spirit. Greet them all with a holy embrace!

All the different gatherings of Abba's saints send their love to you. In the spirit of their unity, I plead with all y'all to watch and be wary for those who divide, for whom division is a victory and creating chaos a cause for rejoicing. Keep such folk at a distance and ignore their teaching, for they crave destruction, especially among gullible folk whom they can deceive.

You are not like them! All the different gatherings of saints, beginning in Jerusalem and extending to all believers, know joy because of what they have heard of you—your obedient trusting, your wisdom about what is right and just and good, and that you are innocent of evil. Abba's *shalom* will crush the Accuser and spread him out like gravel under your feet!

The gift of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, be with all y'all. All who are with me, my colleagues in ministry, send greetings. (I, Tertius, who wrote what brother Paul has spoken, send my personal greetings.) Those here in the gathering—both Gentiles and Israelites, both those whose home offers us hospitality and those who sever in Caesar's offices—send greetings, too.

Now glory and honor be given to the Eternal One, who alone is able to set you upon the foundation of the Cosmos through the Good News Story I proclaim. Glory and honor be given to the One whose wisdom ascends higher than the heavens, who hid the mystery of redemptive and transformative love until the *kairos* for its unveiling had come. Glory and honor be given to the One who guided truth-tellers from age to age to write in ways that, at the unveiling of Jesus the Anointed as Savior and Sovereign, all might come to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life, in praise and adoration forever. Amen!

*Large the family  
Great the praise and thanksgiving  
God's family all*

God, it's me. What a journey with brother Pablo! He seems to be the ultimate salesperson for the ultimate product. How ironic that what Pablo is "selling" cannot be bought, only welcomed as a gift. Abba, I welcome your gift anew. I receive it with thanksgiving.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word for gathering is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church, but the literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>2</sup> Paul's letters are almost all intended to be read aloud to the entire church, gathered in community, which was the ordinary manner of "reading" in the ancient world. (Philemon and the Pastoral Letters of Timothy and Titus appear to be directed exclusively to an individual, though an argument can be made that only Philemon is definitely intended for an individual.)

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word used is *apostoleos*, which usually is translated as apostle, from the verb meaning to send; thus sent one.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as holy and literally means set apart—both set apart from and set apart for.

<sup>5</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus' authority as above Caesar's authority.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word used is *charis*, which is usually translated as grace but also carries the connotation of gift.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaiosisune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaiosisune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Pablo's theology. For Pablo, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior 😊.

<sup>8</sup> c.f. Habbakuk 2:4.

<sup>9</sup> c.f. Psalm 62:12.

<sup>10</sup> c.f. Isaiah 52:5 (in Septuagint).

<sup>11</sup> c.f. Psalm 51:4.

<sup>12</sup> c.f. Psalm 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 36:1; 53:1-3; 59:7-8; 140:3; Ecclesiastes 7:20 and Isaiah 59:7-8.

<sup>13</sup> c.f. Isaiah 6:5.

<sup>14</sup> Torah is the Hebrew word that translates into English as Law. I chose to use Torah rather than Law in the paraphrase to remind readers that Pablo's reference is not to a generalized ethical teaching but to the specific, covenantal obligations articulated in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>15</sup> c.f. Genesis 15:6.

<sup>16</sup> c.f. Psalm 32:1-2.

<sup>17</sup> c.f. Genesis 12:2-3.

<sup>18</sup> c.f. Genesis 17:5.

<sup>19</sup> c.f. Genesis 15:6.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word in this line and the next is *doxa*, which is ordinarily translated using the English "glory" but also has connotations of "reflect" and "weight." I have attempted to convey these nuances in the paraphrase.

<sup>21</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for time. *Chronos*, from which we get the English chronological, means sequential or linear time. *Kairos* refers to the key moment, the inflection point. When Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God saying, "Repent, the time is at hand," he referred to *kairos* time. When a nine-months pregnant woman shows up at a hospital saying, "It's time," she is speaking of *kairos*.

<sup>22</sup> c.f. Romans 12:2 for Paul's description of Torah.

<sup>23</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>24</sup> *Sheol* is a Hebrew word that denotes a shadowy underworld; not quite Hell, not even Hades, but a place where there is life of a sort but not the kind we know on the earthly plane of being.

<sup>25</sup> *Christus Victor* is the understanding of atonement in which Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was a battle against Satan, sin, and death, with Jesus demonstrating the greater power of God by remaining constant in love: "Father, forgive them...." (Luke 23:34). It was the dominant view of atonement for the first 1,000 years of the Church.

<sup>26</sup> c.f. Psalm 44:22.

<sup>27</sup> c.f. Heidelberg Catechism: question and answer #1.

<sup>28</sup> c.f. Genesis 17:17-21.

<sup>29</sup> c.f. Malachi 1:2-3.

<sup>30</sup> c.f. Exodus 33:19.

<sup>31</sup> c.f. Exodus 9:16.

<sup>32</sup> c.f. above, Romans 1:18-32 where God's "judgment" is defined by the action of God "handing us over...."

<sup>33</sup> c.f. Hosea 2:23, Isaiah 10:22 and Isaiah 1:9. In the context of Romans, all three verses appear accusatory and seem to inflict judgment upon Israel. In context in Hosea 2 and Isaiah 1 and 10, all three verses are part of larger passages in which the judgment inflicted upon Israel—exile—is put into a redemptive context; the accusation softened as it were. The larger context includes an additional message of God's remaining faithful to the covenant with Israel to ensure their ultimate protection against destruction and to provide eventual return to the Land. I have tried to frame this section of text to convey this foundational sense of God's mercy which underlies what otherwise may appear harsh and unrelenting.

<sup>34</sup> c.f. Leviticus 18:5.

<sup>35</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 30:12-14.

<sup>36</sup> c.f. Isaiah 28:16 (Septuagint).

<sup>37</sup> c.f. Joel 2:32.

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<sup>38</sup> c.f. Isaiah 52:7.

<sup>39</sup> c.f. Isaiah 53:1.

<sup>40</sup> Tanakh is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter of each of the Masoretic Text's three traditional divisions: Torah (Teaching, also known as the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings)—hence TaNaKh. Our English equivalent might be “From A to Z” or, for a Christian variation, “Gospels, Paul and Revelation.” I reordered Paul's quotations to begin with Deuteronomy in order to conform to the traditional ordering of TANAKH.

<sup>41</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 32:21.

<sup>42</sup> c.f. Psalm 19:4.

<sup>43</sup> c.f. Isaiah 65:1-2.

<sup>44</sup> c.f. 1 Kings 19:10-18 for the next two quotes.

<sup>45</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10.

<sup>46</sup> c.f. Psalms 69:22-23.

<sup>47</sup> I note that these two sentences are not in the Greek text but are included in the interpretive paraphrase because they help the modern reader follow the precise and intentional rhetorical structure Pablo is using to build his argument. These sentences link to the beginning of this passage and help form a bridge to subsequent sections as Pablo “puts the pieces of the puzzle together” and makes his case for Israel's (ultimate) inclusion in God's grace.

<sup>48</sup> c.f. Isaiah 59:20-21.

<sup>49</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 31:33-34.

<sup>50</sup> c.f. Isaiah 40:13.

<sup>51</sup> c.f. Job 41:11.

<sup>52</sup> It pains me that my commitment to avoid religious jargon (e.g. grace), this sentence doesn't end with the phrase amazing grace.

<sup>53</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 32:35.

<sup>54</sup> c.f. Psalm 18:49ff. and Proverbs 25:21-22, which reference an ancient Egyptian custom that conveyed reconciliation between angry neighbors. The custom's message does not mean “make them feel guilty” as many assume but is the exact opposite, with the symbolism conveying a desire to renew friendship.

<sup>55</sup> This sentence is taken from Martin Luther King's famous quote, which serves as an interpretive paraphrase of Romans 12:21.

<sup>56</sup> The Ten Commandments are commonly divided into the first tablet that gives ethics relating to God and the second tablet that gives ethics relating to other people.

<sup>57</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for time (the other being *chronos*) and refers to the key moment for transformation. *Chronos* refers to chronological time as on a watch or clock.

<sup>58</sup> c.f. Isaiah 45:23.

<sup>59</sup> c.f. Psalm 69:9.

<sup>60</sup> c.f. 2 Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49.

<sup>61</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 32:43.

<sup>62</sup> c.f. Psalm 117:1.

<sup>63</sup> c.f. Isaiah 11:10.

<sup>64</sup> “Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord have mercy!”

<sup>65</sup> Ancient Illyricum.

<sup>66</sup> “Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord have mercy!”

<sup>67</sup> c.f. Isaiah 52:15.

<sup>68</sup> The Greek word *diakonan* means deacon and is used to describe Phoebe.

<sup>69</sup> The Greek word *apostolois*, which is the plural form of apostles, is used to describe both Junia and Andronicus.



# PRAYING

## 1 CORINTHIANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING 1 CORINTHIANS

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a marvel of ancient wisdom and modern application. But it can be a frustrating journey for some modern readers because Paul starts a topic, leaves it to discuss something else, and only then gets back to his original topic! Perhaps most frustrating is when Paul does get back to writing about the topic he just left, he often says something different than he had said previously.

It helps to know that Paul was a master of Greek rhetoric and conversant in both its language and forms. One of those forms is called a "ring" or "chiastic" structure. In 1 Corinthians, use of the ring form means Paul writes with tremendous discipline using an A-B-C-B-A format. What may appear to the English reader as Paul leaving and returning to a topic is intentional. What appears as Paul saying something new or nuanced the second time around, with greater depth or sharper application, is intentional.

New Testament scholar Ken Bailey illuminates Paul's method as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- A. The Tradition
- B. The Problem
- C. Foundational Theology
- B. The Problem Restated (in Light of Theology)
- A. A Personal Appeal

Bailey further identifies five, distinct essays in 1 Corinthians, each of which, Bailey demonstrates, follows the ring format. The five essays are:<sup>2</sup>

- A. Cross (1:10–4:16)
- B. Men and Women in the Family (4:17–8:10)
- C. Christ and Culture (8:11–11:1)
- B. Men and Women in Worship (11:2–14:40)
- A. Resurrection (15:1-58)

As I began writing *Praying 1 Corinthians*, I wondered what the experience would be like to read the book as the first Christians might have read it. What would Paul's first letter to the Corinthians sound like when I acknowledge I am reading five, distinct essays and that each essay uses a ring structure that guides Paul's missive to his wayward congregation? I personally found the experience illuminating and hope you do as well. It is for this reason that I divided 1 Corinthians into longer sections than I

ordinarily would for a devotional, thereby creating extended sections to allow Paul's wisdom to express itself.

A second rhetorical form Paul uses comes from his Jewish training as a rabbi: *midrash*.<sup>3</sup> A rabbi's *midrash* in ancient culture was his interpretation of a passage of Scripture, much like a Christian commentary today. A rabbi often cited others before offering his own perspective. Such "you say" or "it is said" is often difficult to distinguish from the rabbi's "and here is what I believe." Paul engages in *midrash* especially in his essay on worship as he seeks to find the path forward for women pastors to lead the Corinthian congregation in worship. In ancient patriarchal culture, this was problematic. I have tried to clarify when Paul engages in *midrash*, clarifying what other rabbis teach about Genesis 1-3 versus Paul's own thought.

A note on my use of cinquain poetry to interpret each passage. A cinquain in its simplest form is a five-line poem, and the cinquains contained below are in their simplest form. I start with a one-word title that serves as the topic, then use two, three, and four words in subsequent lines before concluding again with a single word that expresses some nuance of the original topic. More sophisticated cinquains have rules for lines two through five (e.g. only adjectives in line two, only gerunds in line three, etc.) but such rules are beyond my ability as a poet. My motto is Keep It Simple, Saints!

There is nothing simple about 1 Corinthians, however, and it is, arguably, Paul's most pastorally challenging letter. Paul engages a church in trouble, with conflict around every corner—both inside the church and in the wider culture. In Corinth, Paul found a church struggling to claim its unity much less express it; a church uncertain about how to live the God-life ethically; a church confused about how to relate to a dominant secular culture where the Christian gathering was perceived to be a strange, minority sect; a church in which gender roles were changing and worship forms were not yet settled; a church whose central proclamation of resurrection seemed at odds with the deeply held expectations and convictions of the day. In other words, Paul wrote to a church very much like your church or my church.

Brad Munroe  
February 2021

## 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

### Introduction: Set apart for a purpose

Paulos, chosen by Imma as a sent one<sup>4</sup> of Jesus by the strength of her full being and personhood, and our brother Sosthenes, send you gift<sup>5</sup> and *shalom*<sup>6</sup> from Imma and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>7</sup> Goodwill and friendship we extend to the gathering<sup>8</sup> of Imma's beloved in Corinth, to those who have been made holy, who are being made holy and who will be made completely whole in Jesus. Loving-kindness to you who have been chosen and set apart<sup>9</sup> from the culture of death and destruction in order to be set apart for Imma's purposes. May Imma's gift of presence abide with you all who, along with all people in every time and place who call on Jesus as Rescuer and acknowledge him as sovereign above Caesar, are set apart for the work of reconciliation and renewal of all the cosmos, and who will bow before Jesus.

I am forever and always thanking Imma for all of you. As I ponder the gift infused within you all through Jesus the Anointed, I am brought to wonder and invited to awe. In Jesus you all are spiritually rich beyond imagination: all kinds of abilities to speak truth into the world have been gifted within you all, and y'all have been given insight into Imma's divine purpose for creation. (We take pride in this, by the way, for it affirms that our speaking Jesus' Story to you proved powerful enough to create transformation.)

Thus, (to get back to what Imma has done among you all), y'all are wildly gifted with gifts beyond yourselves, gifts to be used for others' blessing, gifts you all use while you await expectantly for the fullness of Jesus the Anointed to be revealed as sovereign above Caesar. While you wait for the full revelation of Jesus, know this: Jesus will help you all stay set apart from death and destruction and set apart for Imma's purposes of reconciliation and renewal of the cosmos. Jesus will help all y'all as long as required, until after the end of all time. Imma will do this because she is faithful and passionately longs for relationship and has made relationship possible through Jesus the Anointed, the sovereign above Caesar.

*Gratitude  
wonder, awe  
receiving good gifts  
sharing joy and passion  
thankful*

God, it's me. Paulos points to a profound purpose and path: being gifted for serving, blessing, giving, sharing, and celebrating Imma's goodness. I am grateful, profoundly thankful, that I do not have to walk this path of my own power, of my own skill and ability. I am grateful I walk the path together with you, infused with gifts beyond myself, and walk the path with others. Together we are on a sacred journey, to live more deeply into the truth that Jesus is sovereign above Caesar. In your mercy, walk with us through the good, the bad, the broken, and the grace-filled.

## First Essay: Cross

### 1 Corinthians 1:10-16

#### The Tradition: Fussing and fighting

A wise man once asked, "Can't we all just get along?" If such a plaintive cry can be asked by one in the culture, how much more should the question apply to those who form the Body, who are gathered, and in whom Jesus, sovereign above Caesar, lives through the Divine Spirit? So I plead with all y'all to allow harmony to live among you and unity of heart, mind, and speech be the God-rhythms of your life together.

The word I heard from Chloe's family is that y'all are fussing and fighting all the time, seeking primacy of place, rooting against each other as if you are rival fans of teams from different cities: "I'm a Buckeye and our quarterback is Paulos." "I'm a Longhorn and our quarterback is Apollos." "I'm a Gator and our quarterback is Peter." "I'm a Wildcat and Jesus is our quarterback." Really? Is this what your community life has become?

Is Jesus sovereign above Caesar or not? Was I crucified? Did I heal your broken relationship with Abba? Did I give you your true name—Beloved of Abba? I thank Abba that I baptized no one except Cris and Guy and not in my own name, not of my power nor authority. Okay, maybe Stephan's family I also baptized; really, I forget, but my point is clear. The message of Jesus is not about me.

Unity  
worth seeking  
laying aside division  
fussing? fighting? choosing sides?  
really?

God, it's me. I, like Paulos, know what we are created to be, called to be, given your Spirit so that we may be: the Body, a Holy Temple, a Nation set apart, the Family of Abba—all plural realities. Why, then, is it so difficult to get along with one another? Why are "church fights" among the most intense and destructive? I long to live more deeply and faithfully into the truth of our baptisms: we belong to you! All of us. Me. My pastor. The ornery. The kind. The snarky. The clueless. The gentle. Abba, make us one in Jesus—the way you intend for us to be.

### 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:2

#### The Problem: Not seeking the cruciform life

We become fools whenever we argue about such things as baptism and who is greater than whom, whose preaching is better or who is most the prayer warrior. Our life together is cruciform, a cross-shaped, cross-formed, cross-guided life whose power comes as we give our own *dunamis* away.<sup>10</sup> The way of cruciform living is crazy-talk to those suffocating in pursuit of power and control, but to all of us who walk together as those in whom and through whom the God-life is being manifested and made whole, it is spiritual poetry that makes us able: able to speak truth to power and lift up the humble, able to come alongside the broken with healing balm, able to dream of a society of justice and joy, able to invite others to dance with us to the God-rhythms of the God-life. As the truth-teller Isaiah once wrote:

Knowledge is broken by experience;  
intelligence stumbles over its own hubris.<sup>11</sup>

Where is the scholar whose research revealed the transformative nature of Jesus' redemptive love? Where is the politician whose policies sought to emulate his life? Where is the marketing genius who suggested giving your life away as the path to freedom and peace? Imma has made their wisdom look foolish. She turned their wisdom upside-down and inside-out and showed the world that real wisdom has power to make people whole and bring right relationships to those who trust her to love them.

Everyone looks for an angle. Religious Carnival Barkers want "miracles, miracles, miracles" while Wall Street Bankers search for what is prudent and secure, but we preach the cruciform Way of Jesus, life given away that

it might be found, service to others as the path to personal blessing, reaching heaven's heights as we drop to our knees in prayer. Our message seems absurd to both Barkers and Bankers, but to all whom Imma has made her own children, the Way of Jesus unleashes spiritual dynamite and gives insight beyond our own ability. For Imma's foolishness is wiser than all the Barkers and Bankers combined. Imma's little finger lifts more than their combined strength.

Beloved, look at yourselves in the mirror; comb through your high school yearbooks and take note. Be honest now: most of you were a motley crew of pimples and bad hair cuts. Most of us are not trust-fund kids nor child prodigies. We come from among the poor and even the oppressed. We come from working class parents and even as orphans. We come from the kind of places that aren't all that special, but we are made special because Imma has chosen us.

Imma has embarrassed the proud by choosing us, the humble. Imma has shamed the "might makes right" crowd by choosing us, those without power of their own. Imma has mortified the sophisticated by choosing us, the Imma-washed masses. Imma chose us, whom the culture despises. Imma chose us, who cannot lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Imma chose us to make clear her purpose: all life must be received as a gift; only her gift received with humility and an open heart transforms us into the beautiful artistry Imma intends us to be. Therefore, as the truth-teller Jeremiah wrote:

May your boasting be for Imma's glory.<sup>12</sup>

In this same way I came to you, brothers and sisters, neither tickling your ears<sup>13</sup> nor your fancy. I surrendered my own wisdom to witness Imma's truth. I shared with you the only thing of which I am confident: Jesus the Anointed emptied himself of his divinity that he might embrace fully our humanity—even on a Roman cross.

Cross  
God's wisdom  
emptying, losing, loosing  
true path to fulfillment  
wisdom

God, it's me. The world still doesn't get it, and I'm not sure the Church does either. I'm not sure I do! The way of the cross is romanticized in stories about Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa. The self-emptying life seems poetic in the prose of Henri Nouwen or the preaching of Barbara Brown Taylor. It seems more difficult with my employer, my spouse, my kids, my neighbors, and don't even get me started about my Facebook feed. I long to embrace the poetry of the God-life, so why do I find it so difficult to dance to your God-rhythms. Imma, in your mercy, teach me the joy of holy surrender!

### 1 Corinthians 2:3-16

#### Foundational Theology: the *dunamis* of God

When I visited y'all in Corinth, I was something of a mess: anxious and afraid. I knew my words would sound foolish and out of touch with the cultural moment, but I trusted Abba's spirit to bring *dunamis*, to make my words dynamic in ways that would unlock your trust. Our message may seem to the culture like the rambling of a homeless man on the street, but we know it is Abba's sacred poetry for those ready to hear it, ready to dive deep into the portals of time to learn the purpose of creation itself, ready to leap forward in sacred imagination to comprehend the fulfillment of eternity. As the truth-teller Isaiah has written:

You don't get it because you can't see it nor hear it;  
mind-blowing beyond belief –  
what Abba has crafted and will unfold in love.<sup>14</sup>

The culture cannot comprehend these things, but Abba has revealed them to us through his Divine Spirit. Abba's Divine Spirit is on a quest for the poetry of truth, exploring the depths of Abba's character and nature to unveil his purpose. This should not be a surprise, for who knows what is inside oneself better than one's own spirit? In the same way, Abba's Divine Spirit knows Abba's purpose and is glad to show it to us. The culture has one purpose and Abba has another: through the Spirit we are taught the way of Abba, the purpose of creation itself, and its fulfillment in Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar.

This is what we teach to you and to all—the spiritual wisdom that has always been, is found in Jesus the Anointed, and will become the fulfillment of the cosmos. We do not expect the culture, immersed as it is in power

and control, greed and distorted pleasure, to comprehend our teaching. How can it make sense to them? These things are not obvious to the eyes nor the ears of mere humans but must be received in the heart; indeed, they can only be received because Abba has freely shared his poetry with us. And they are received when we, with our human spirits, open ourselves to the whispers of Abba's Divine Spirit. This can only happen through the *dunamis* that flows to us spiritually, as the truth-teller Isaiah wrote:

Who can read Abba's mind?

Who pretends to be Abba's mentor?<sup>15</sup>

We are not Abba's mentor but instead are mentored by Abba, who gives us the wisdom of Jesus, the Crucified One.

Wisdom  
spiritual mystery  
wondering and wandering  
learning God-rhythms anew  
wholeness

God, it's me. I see, (or at least I think I see), that I am part of a larger story—my life a single chapter or perhaps just a word. But when combined with all the other words and pages and chapters from the lives around me, they form the most exquisite story, the Story in which Jesus is revealed as sovereign above Caesar. But not through power and might and manipulation but through a love so pure it forms the creative core of the universe, a love expressed by Jesus on the Cross. My mind can hardly wrap itself around the wonder of it all. Perhaps this is a job for spiritual mystics rather than a mere follower like myself. And yet, I hear your invitation, spoken as a whisper that permeates my entire person. I hear your invitation to surrender my false self that I might discover my true self, to surrender my temporal focus that I might see more clearly toward your eternity, to surrender knowing for trusting and fear for faith, to surrender—most of all—my brokenness to your love. Yeah, I think this is what I'll do. And die trying.<sup>16</sup>

## 1 Corinthians 3:1–16

### The Problem Restated I: God's Temple

So let's try this again, with more depth and clarity this time. Earlier I could not speak to you about our unity in Imma as those who understood spiritual wisdom, so I wrote to you as those captivated by culture, distracted by societal concerns that invite spiritual deadness. So I spoke to you as if you are infants—and, indeed, that is what you are as you live according to your false self and ignore the true self the Divine Spirit is forming you to become. Please do not argue with me about this point, for how can you claim spiritual wisdom and maturity if you are still fussing and fighting about divisions and who is greatest or most worthy of acclaim? If you really think Paulos or Apollos are your quarterback, you are seriously misguided and still living according to your false self. After all, who am I? Who is Apollos? Are we not mere servants of the Master, Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar?

Jesus is guiding all of our work and has assigned each of us a task that serves community and creation. Jesus called me to plant seeds. Jesus called Apollos to water them. And Imma makes them grow. The one who plants is doing a job just as the one who waters is doing a job, and the job is made effective only because Imma is at work within, through, and beyond us to fulfill her purpose. We are all a part of Imma's team, working alongside her to bring the mystery of eternity into the here and now—and that includes y'all, for each of y'all are a part of that work: Imma's seeds are planted in y'all and together all y'all are fitting together as a holy temple in which Imma's presence is discovered.

A gift was given to me from Imma, and with it I laid a foundation as a wise builder would. Someone else builds on my foundation, which is natural, and they should build with care, for there is only one real and true and trustworthy foundation upon which we build: Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. If we think our wealth or wonderful selves adorning this foundation add value to it, we are most misguided. All that is temporal will fall away—silver and gold, precious stones or finely carved wood, hay or straw that burns in the summer—it's all the same. The Day of Imma's judgment will come and reveal that which is eternal, dividing wheat from chaff and precious from dross. Each person's work, including mine, will be burned as in fire—not for punishment but to reveal that which is eternal. All that is burned up is lost forever—though Imma

will spare us. All that remains will live forever in Imma's bosom. Seek that which will survive Imma's purging fire.<sup>17</sup>

So what am I getting at with this talk of gifts to all and purging fire? I want you to understand this: y'all are Imma's Holy Temple. It was once said of the Temple in Jerusalem that it was the one place on earth where the fullness of Imma's presence could be found; now that place is you, as in y'all, all y'all, together. Imma's presence and Divine Spirit live in, among, and between you all. This is why your unity and oneness are so precious! If someone destroys Imma's "Temple," her presence is scattered. Anyone who causes the gathering of Imma's saints to fracture is creating a crack in the foundation of the sacred. This cannot be.

*Temple  
God's presence  
displayed in those  
whom the Spirit moves  
community*

God, it's me. The church is not a building! The church is the gathering of sinners made saints in Jesus. The "Holy Temple" is me and the cute family two pews in front of me, the off-tune singer four rows back (why can't he sing more softly?), and the distracted mom worried about her teenage daughter. We are the Church—the "place" in whom and through whom you live and express yourself in this world. Does this still count when we are in Zoom church?

## 1 Corinthians 3:17–4:13

### The Problem Restated II: Cruciform life

Don't kid yourselves. The ways of the world, the craftiness of culture, are not helpful in the light of eternity. It is easy to win the battle and lose the war—gain the whole world and lose your true self. So rather than play a loser's game you can't win, live according to the God-rhythms modeled by Jesus the Anointed. People may call you a fool, but Imma will call you wise—and beloved. The wisdom of scholars, marketers and politicians is driven in Imma's sight, as Job reminds us:

The highest human wisdom,  
absurdity in the extreme;  
and Imma is not fooled by it.<sup>18</sup>

Or as the Psalmist reminds us:

Imma knows how foolish we are  
and what fools we can be.<sup>19</sup>

So stop already with fussing and fighting about human leaders! Every human leader is, at best, a mere servant, provided to you by Imma as a gift to help you dance to God-rhythms. Paulos, Apollos, Peter, we are all the same: gifts and servants provided to help you live more deeply, more faithfully, more expansively into the God-life that you may become your true selves. Indeed, Imma uses all circumstances—life and death, present and future—all of it to bring you into the knowledge that you belong to Jesus, who belongs to Imma.

So here is how I want to be viewed; that is, how you can show respect to us: consider us servants who have been entrusted with caring for a priceless possession, for we have been entrusted with the wisdom of the God-life revealed in Jesus the Anointed. And I take the responsibility for this service most seriously! I couldn't care less what you or others think of me—only Imma's opinion of my service matters. Even my own opinion means nothing so long as Imma judges my service as faithful.

So don't give the final stamp of approval nor of disapproval before the *kairos*<sup>20</sup> moment, which Imma will reveal in her own, sweet time. She will shine light into dark corners and expose the motives of every heart. In the moment of Imma's full and complete unveiling of the God-life, each individual will receive their measure of praise: not more and not less.

I have been speaking of my service and Apollos' service as a matter of example, as we both seek to be faithful to the work Imma has given to each of us. As we each had a job to do and did it, so you must follow our example. Respect your skills—those you have—and accept your limits—what skills you lack. But even more, accept your gifts as given from Imma, which also means accepting others have gifts, too, as they are also given by Imma. Remember the saying, “Stay in your lane,” and do the job you have been given—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Do it without boasting.

You seem too full of yourselves, as if all you have been given by Imma is something you all earned yourselves! You all have everything you could ever want. You are rich and powerful, with no need from the likes of us. You think you are in charge of the universe! Oh my!

That sounds really nice! Can I share in some of that fame and wealth and power?

I am speaking sarcastically, of course, as this is not that to which Imma has called me. Here we are, mere sent ones, whom Imma has entrusted to train you in her God-rhythms. We're just tagging along in the back of the line. We are like the slaves who follow the generals, the centurions, and the soldiers into the arena—slaves who have come to entertain the masses and die for their amusement. In your eyes, we seem like a sad, sorry spectacle—so lowly, such suffering, the stench of sweat and poverty all around us. You say of us, “What fools to allow suffering to be your lot!” And say of yourselves, “Aren't we wise for staying safe and distant from human need, never having to get our hands dirty.” You say of us, “Poor and pathetic, fools!” And say of yourselves, “Rich and ready to party! How sweet it is!” You are most honored while we are always dishonored!

And yet, I demand an answer: “Which of us is following Jesus the Anointed in walking the Way of the Cross? Which of us is living the cruciform life that follows the model set by Jesus who is sovereign above Caesar?” To this very day, this very hour, our every minute, we hunger and thirst. We dress in rags like the homeless people we are. We are mercilessly taunted and brutally mistreated, even as we work with our own hands, which ache from our unrelenting toil.

And yet, when cursed, we bless. When tormented, we endure. When slandered, we respond with kindness. We have become the lowest of the low—even now, in this very moment—and so are able to confess with great confidence that the Cross which is foolishness to the world is the place where Imma's wisdom is found, and when we are weak, Imma is strong.

*Servanthood  
gentle commitment  
required for leadership  
caring enough to suffer  
together*

God, it's me. I hear Paulos calling me to look at the world through a cross-shaped lens: to see the world with downside-up ethics and outside-in morals, where honor is given to those who have not the things of this world; to hear children's glee as eloquent speech and

political speech as the babble of fools; to show respect to those in whom Imma's image appears most tarnished and give praise to those whose life is offered in service for others' redemption. I hear Paulos calling me to look with Jesus' eyes to see beyond the surface to one's soul, and to hear with Jesus' ears the cry of grief and anger and loss as prayers of lament. Imma, may I not boast in my own skills and abilities as in the opportunity to be an instrument of your peace, the healing of the nations, beginning with the one life who stands before me this day.

### 1 Corinthians 4:14-16

#### Personal Appeal: Imitate me

I know my words sting. I write them because I love y'all enough to speak the truth to all of you. Y'all can be surrounded by ten thousand angels and encircled by ten thousand more of the faithful all committed to protect you, and you will still only have one father in Jesus—that's me. I am your father in Jesus as the one who brought his Good News story to each and every one of you. This is why I speak so bluntly, and this is why I say: all y'all need to imitate me in living the Way of the Cross.

*Truth  
heart speech  
respectful, honest words  
courageous yet with trepidation  
loving*

God, it's me. I have been on the receiving end of such speeches: the truth spoken in love. I have to admit: I am not very good at receiving such words. Not from my family. Not from my friends. Not from my employer. I vacillate between defensiveness and denial, between wanting to shut down and lash out. And then.... And then, as I reflect upon words of truth spoken in love, I realize I am not less loved because I accept this truth, nor am I less YOUR beloved because I affirm the need for change and growth and transformation within me, upon me, from me. May I learn the gift of the truth spoken in love to me by another. And may I learn the gift of the truth spoken in love to another by me. Most of all, may I learn to be eager in accepting

another's word to me and gentle in offering my own word to another. And, God, one last thing: I want to thank you for those who are my parents in Jesus. Right now, in this moment, I remember them and give thanks for them.<sup>21</sup>

### Second Essay:

#### Men and Women in the Family

### 1 Corinthians 4:17-5:9

#### The Tradition: Toxicity is not the Way

I have reasons for what I do, and I have sent Timothy to you all. Timothy is like a son to me, one whom I deeply love and whose deep love is expressed as trust in Abba. I sent Timothy to remind y'all about how to live as those who belong to Jesus the Anointed. What he will say to you is what I teach everywhere I go and applies to all the gatherings of Jesus followers.

I feel the need to send Timothy because some of you have grown cocky, as if you have everything figured out and have no need for me, no need to learn anything from someone else. Let me set the record straight: I'll be with you soon, *en shallah*,<sup>22</sup> and find out for myself who is talking the talk without walking the walk; that is, who knows Good News words and who lives with Good News *dunamis*. It's your choice: shall I visit you as coach or critic, as a friend in ministry or sitting as one who chairs a disciplinary hearing?

The reports I am hearing are that there is sexual deviancy among you of the type found only in pornography: a man is having sex with his father's wife! And you not only find this acceptable but are proud of yourselves, crowing like cocks about how liberated you are. Never!

Instead of pride you should grieve and mourn and should have already cleaved this man from your gathering. I may not be present in body, but I am with you spiritually in prayer and love and accountability, and I have already declared in mind and heart I will not abide with this, and nor should you. Because of the character of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, you must let go of this man—releasing him from the bonds of your fellowship that he might continue his journey toward the Evil One, who will feast on the man's false self. Only in this way might the

man's true self be claimed by Jesus on the Day when Abba makes all things whole and complete.

Until the Day arrives and the fulness of the God-life is revealed, shut your yaps! Stop boasting about things you clearly do not understand. It is not a good look, nor helpful for you physically, ethically, socially, or spiritually. Don't you know even a smidge of wheat makes the bread not gluten-free?

Get rid of the toxins that make you impure and that defile you. Renounce what is set apart for the world's brokenness and covenant anew to that which is set apart for the God-life. You are to be unleavened bread, without impurities, toxins, or additives, for Jesus, the Lamb of God, has offered his very self to restore your wholeness. Therefore, live as those who celebrate the Divine Spirit's work of authenticity and honesty and healing rather than live as those who consume empty calories that fill the belly but not the soul. Do not dance to the beats of a broken world intent on its own destruction.

*Arrogance  
ego unbound  
wounding, blinding, scarring  
humiliating the other for  
sport*

God, it's me. Wow! And I often imagined the first Christians to be holy—all "religified" like saints should be. I never imagined incest! And in a church! I am tempted to gloat, to permit my arrogance of time and culture to allow me to imagine we are better than they. And then I remember: incest and abuse are also a modern scourge upon the vulnerable. Only we know better (or should). We know not to look the other way when we see someone violate a boundary. We know to believe a victim's story. We know to say something, to call the authorities, to be a "reporter" even if we are not a "mandatory reporter." We know better (or should). Abba, in the coming verses from Paulos, let me hear them not from the seat of judgment but from the kneeling bench of the confessional, not as if he and I are looking down together at the licentiousness of his age, but as if he alone is looking me in the eye and asking, "Are you expressing the God-life as a community in what you teach, in what you do, and in the ways you hold one another accountable?"

## 1 Corinthians 5:9-6:8

### The Problem: Holding ourselves accountable

I wrote to you a while back<sup>23</sup> not to get jiggy with sexually broken people. I did not mean y'all shouldn't converse or have commerce with broken people, wounded folks, or even the depraved; otherwise, you would have to live somewhere off by yourself, alone in the desert.<sup>24</sup> You live in the midst of those whose lives lack the God-rhythms that lead to wholeness, but their cruelty and depravity must remain apart from you—like unleavened dough that holds no yeast.

What I mean today is that these people should not be your spiritual flesh and blood even if they claim to be brothers and sisters in Jesus. The union of heart, mind, and spirit with those who express the culture's cruelty and the world's depravity must not be. Instead, create healthy boundaries, by which I mean be holy—literally set apart from the world and set apart for the God-life.<sup>25</sup> Do not seek holy communion or try to share lives as holy community with those who, because of their own brokenness and wounding, cannot express a holy compassion for the world.

So here is the point: It is not the gathering's business to judge those in the wider culture, but it is our business to hold ourselves accountable. Leave those beyond the gathering to Imma, whose justice and mercy embrace in Jesus the Anointed. As for those within the gathering, heed the words of Moses:

Separate yourselves from those who will pollute your soul, demean your ethics, and tarnish your witness.<sup>26</sup>

Don't parade your internal arguments in front of those outside the gathering but rather bring to your siblings in Jesus your need to wrestle right from wrong. Don't forget: on the Day when Imma makes all things whole and complete, all y'all will be deputized as her judges! If y'all can judge the entire world, you can sort out your own dirty laundry as a community. Thus, if you have disputes—and you will as they are inevitable in this world among we whose very best goodness is yet tinged with brokenness<sup>27</sup>—discuss them together openly and with transparency, as well as with respect and kindness. You who will preside over Imma's angels: you got this.

Therefore, I say again: don't parade your dirty laundry before those who themselves have never washed a sheet. I actually hope you are kind of embarrassed with yourselves! Is there really no one wise enough among you

to know a man living in incest is not acceptable?<sup>28</sup> And this “presenting problem” is only a symptom of your lack of mutual accountability. There are still other and still more issues for which you are equipped to speak truth in love to one another, for which you have been gifted to discover the holy community Imma herself creates among you.

As I listen to all the stories of public squabbles and even lawsuits among you—and in Caesar’s courts at that!—I wonder: do you not know that whether you win or lose your lawsuit in the human court, you have already lost in Imma’s Court? Would it not be better to suffer injustice after the model of Jesus the Anointed? Could you not walk his cruciform Way rather than swindle a beloved sibling? My beloved, let not the way of Caesar be the path you walk but rather walk the Way of Jesus.

*Depravity  
totally tinged  
inviting, influencing, infecting  
with misery and sorrow  
fracture*

God, it’s me. Paulos seems to have a higher opinion of churches and church-folk than I do—and I am one of them! He seems to think we will one day judge the angels; though, in his defense, Paulos seems to acknowledge we are not yet prepared for such an exalted duty. I don’t think Paulos ever sat through some of my elders’ meetings—he would know we are not ready, at least not now! And yet I have seen the journey toward healing, toward becoming the holy community we are called to be—the sightings come in glimpses, a bit of gift unexpected yet deeply appreciated. I have heard whispers of Imma’s Spirit speak through people from whom kind words rarely pass their lips. I suppose this is the work of Imma upon them and through them. Perhaps Imma’s work is not only upon them but upon me, and together upon us. Imma, in your mercy, hear our prayer. By your mercy, make us the type of church Paulos thinks we are (or will become).

## 1 Corinthians 6:9-12

### Foundational Theology: Freedom with limits

Are you unaware that those who betray justice<sup>29</sup> will not be children in Abba’s reign of sovereign love? Don’t kid yourselves: those who pursue degradation of self and others are not living the God-life—Stalking pleasure at the expense of others’ dignity is a grievous sin. Likewise, those who flee obligation, responsibility, and accountability for the sake of their own benefit destroy the beloved community in which they seek to live—this cannot be. This was y’all before Abba reached down and grabbed you by the scruff of your necks and hauled you out of the dark pit in which all y’all were trapped. Yes, Abba did this upon all of you and for all of you through Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. By the Divine Spirit, whose power overshadowed all y’all, Abba conceived in you that which y’all could not do for yourselves.

Because of your freedom in Jesus, you kid yourselves, saying, “I can do whatever I want!” You can, but harm will come, for not everything you want leads to the God-life. Even when you double down, as in a toddler’s tantrum, shouting, “I said I can do whatever I want,” it remains true that Abba calls you to walk ever deeper into his light, life, and love.

*Choices  
road forks  
desiring, discerning, deciding  
toward life or not  
pathway.*

God, it’s me. I hear a longing in Paulos, a sadness that some choose the way of destruction—of self and other, of body and spirit. I hear sadness in his tone but not despair. Paulos is a man of great hope, it seems. He believes that Abba can save us through Jesus. He also believes salvation is a matter of life and death, of healing and wholeness and hope. Oh, Abba, may I walk the way of Jesus that leads to life!

## 1 Corinthians 6:13-20

### The Problem Restated: Purity is union with God

I have heard you all say, “Eating is for pleasure and pleasure is for the body! After all, who cares what happens to the “mere physical shell” when Imma is going to destroy

it?” Yet the “mere physical shell”—your bodies—are not designed to be degraded but to receive blessing and offer honor to Imma.<sup>30</sup> With your “mere physical shell” as you put it, y’all shower Imma with adoration and praise! The *dunamis* unleashed by Imma raised Jesus from the dead, and this a bodily resurrection. Likewise, Imma will raise us, in both body and soul, from death to life!

Here’s a sacred mystery for you to ponder: each one of you, as an individual, belongs in life and in death, in body and in soul, to Jesus. You are connected with Jesus in the depths of your person in ways that bind you together as one—eternally and forever. So when you ascend to the Greek temple in Corinth to pay your taxes by having sex with one of the temple prostitutes, it may seem innocent to you—“It’s just sex.” But these prostitutes honor the pagan gods! You are uniting your body with their body, as it says,

The two become one in the flesh by their union.<sup>31</sup>

Your entire person is united with Imma through the Divine Spirit; therefore, flee degradation, turn away from fractured relationships in order to turn toward union that blesses and brings wholeness. Sexual sin is not worse than other sin, but it does impact your “mere physical shell.” What is more, your bodies—taken together to form Imma’s holy community—are the real temple in this world, the place in which Imma dwells and through whom she expresses herself in the world. Please don’t degrade what Imma makes beautiful, for Imma gave her beloved son for all y’all, and you are created to honor her in all things, even with your “mere physical shell.”

*Sex*  
*bodies intertwined*  
*giving, receiving, belonging*  
*love, intimacy, joy, pleasure*  
*union*

God, it’s me. I have heard from others that Paulos was uptight about sex. I’m not hearing that here. Instead, I hear Paulos saying there is a beauty and intimacy, a sharing and belonging, that comes through our physical union. What Paulos seems to be for is far more significant than what he is against: he wants our pleasure in body to reflect our joy in spirit, for our union together to reflect our participation as a part of Imma’s temple, her dwelling place on earth. What

Paulos seems to be against are the forms of sexual expression that degrade us, defining us only by our passions and not our full person. Paulos may indeed be a prude by today’s standards, but I find this enticing.

## 1 Corinthians 7:1-40

### Personal Appeal: Celibacy and marriage

So, regarding the questions you asked when you wrote me: the ideal state is abstinence for the sake of devotion and focus for ministry. However, real life gets in the way of the ideal life. In order to avoid sexual sin, devote yourselves to each other—husband to wife and wife to husband, giving yourselves to each other for either pleasure or procreation, as Abba wills. If you “deprive” each other, it should be by mutual agreement for the sake of a time of sexual fasting so to devote yourselves to prayer. Break your fast with joy and in so doing avoid the Tempter’s lure, for sex is a powerful force. I say all this as a matter of practical wisdom not as a commandment. I wish all people would be celibate like me but know that celibacy is Abba’s gift, not given to all.

To the unmarried—whether through choice or circumstance—I say this: remain unmarried if you can! However, if physical desire consumes your thoughts, by all means, get married. It is better to choose and be chosen by a life partner than to burn with unrequited desire, which only leads to poor choices and sin.

To the married I remind you of this command, (for it comes not from me but from Abba): the ideal is to remain faithful to the marriage covenant. Remain married or seek to reconcile. If a wife separates from her husband, it is best not to marry again. Husbands should not discard their wives by divorcing them.<sup>32</sup>

Here is more of my wisdom, (mine not Abba’s). If one of you is married to an unbeliever, don’t divorce them but continue to hold sacred the covenant of marriage. This is true both for wives and husbands in the family of faith. Your holiness makes your spouse sacred; indeed, your children, too, are set apart for Abba by the sanctity of your life and through honoring your vows and the covenant you have made.

Now for both my sisters and brothers, if your unbelieving spouse leaves you, you are free to let them go. You are liberated from the bonds formed by your vow, and Abba desires for you to live in peace. Do not fret for what might have been, for there is no way for you to know

whether or not your love would have led your spouse to Abba and to their becoming whole.

The rule I apply to all people in all the gatherings I have planted is this: wherever you are, be there. Whatever your circumstance, live with honor. If your skin is unmarked, keep it that way. If you are all “tatted up,” keep your tattoos. Men who are already circumcised can’t become uncircumcised, and men who are uncircumcised shouldn’t become circumcised. Be who you are as Abba called you.

The rule to be who you are wherever you are is true also of your circumstance. If you are free, “Huzzah! Huzzah!” Freedom in human terms allows you to commit yourself as Abba’s bondservant. However, those of you who are not free, who, because of human sin and the broken structures of economic and social bondage, are compelled to a particular service, should not be troubled. (Of course, if you can become free of your service, by all means do so!) Remember that Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, has paid for you—covered all your debts, mended the ripped seams between body and soul, and, most of all, made you Abba’s beloved child. There is no greater freedom than that. So, my dear brothers and sisters, remember you are responsible to Abba before all others; your personal circumstance is a secondary commitment to the life you live in Abba.

Now let me give you a personal word, my own perspective as one who has a wee bit of wisdom. (This is not Abba’s command, just my opinion.) I suspect the culmination of all things is upon us, or soon will be. If I am correct, it is best to remain in whatever circumstance in which you find yourself. If engaged, go ahead and get married. If single, stay that way—not that marriage is sin, of course, just that married life is complicated. And if I am correct that Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, is returning soon to bring about the restoration and wholeness of all things, it’s best to be unencumbered. As of today, it is best if you live light and easy, bags packed but not too much luggage, ready to roll at a moment’s notice. Live as if this world is a vague memory and you long for the new age that is coming.

As one gifted by Abba with celibacy, I may fail to comprehend how difficult my advice is to keep. However, I long to ease your burden, to lighten your earthly load. If you have a family, Abba requires for you to devote yourselves to them for care, concern, and compassion. Husbands love their wives. Wives love their husbands. Their effort and energy is divided between heaven and

earth. This is as it should be! But if you are like me, you can devote yourselves totally and completely to Abba’s service.

Before you accuse me of not understanding the bodily drives that compel human desire, know that I allow you to marry, if you must. You are not sinning! If desire drives you toward sexual intimacy, get married! All I am saying is that for the one who can control her or his lusts, the one for whom sexual desire does not influence their will, it is better to remain unmarried in order to devote oneself only and especially to Abba.

Finally, let me give a word about the widows. A married woman is connected to her husband as long as they both shall live. If her husband dies, she is free and can marry whomever she wants, though her new husband should belong to Abba. In my personal opinion, the widow would be better off remaining single, and certainly happier, and even if I say so myself, I have the Divine Spirit in me so I know something about being happy in Abba.

*Marriage*  
*mutual devotion*  
*sharing, working, longing*  
*comfort, frustration, joy, endurance*  
*journey*

God, it’s me. As one who is clergy but not Roman Catholic, I appreciate being married. I cannot imagine NOT being married to my beloved. And yet, I know my friend and colleague, a priest, who feels toward his circumstance as I do toward mine. I know, too, friends who have chosen singleness as a life, while others have it chosen for them through trial or tragedy. Abba, I guess I want to say, “Thank you,” for the happiness of my own circumstance and, “Bless and be with those,” for whom their personal circumstance brings sorrow. Teach me and teach us the gift of seeking your shalom at all times, in all circumstances, for all people, today and into all tomorrows.

## Third Essay: Christ and Culture

### 1 Corinthians 8:1-11

#### The Tradition: Dealing with Pagan idols

I understand that y'all are concerned about what to do with food that has been sacrificed to pagan idols. That makes sense to me—you don't want to be a bad example to your pagan neighbors and have them think your love of Imma is of no importance. Y'all know the idols are just idols, mere wood or silver, but take care not to inflict your knowledge on those who do not understand these things. Knowledge inflates the head, but love builds the Body. It is more important to love than to know, for those who love have the greatest knowledge—that they are loved by Imma.

Your personal knowledge gives you freedom, for you know idols don't actually exist. "There is no God but One," is an ancient confession. What others call "gods" or "lords" are but names people use. For us, there is but one God, Imma, from whom and for whom all things exist. For us, there is but one Sovereign, Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar and through whom all things exist and are sustained, including our true selves.

Not everyone comprehends these truths of Imma's Oneness and Jesus' sovereignty. That all things were created and cohere in them is hidden to some. Such folks believe with conviction that the food sacrificed to idols has been spiritually infiltrated by the idol, that a god's power permeates that which they ingest. Their conscience is weak and easily led astray, yet we know food is of no matter, neither bringing us close to Imma or keeping us far from her. Eat or don't eat—we know it matters not in Imma's eyes for the sake of her love for us. But it may matter much to others who believe idols have true power. They may see your liberty and be caused to stumble. Believing idols have power, they may see your example and be encouraged to participate fully in the pagan festivals, giving themselves over to that which cannot bring life. In this way, your "knowledge" draws them away from Jesus, who gave his life for them. In this way, you sin not just against those whose convictions are weak, you sin against Jesus himself. Let not your knowledge get in the way of your love. If my eating meat causes them to fall, I'll gladly become a vegetarian. Charity before liberty!

*Freedom  
responsible choice  
making decisions well  
loving openly toward light  
liberating*

God, it's me. The notion of "meat sacrificed to idols" is such a disconnect for me—too far from the life I live for me to understand. Yet I can comprehend watching those I love, who watch me; seeing the faith I express can influence them toward or away from Jesus. I can comprehend there are things for which I have personal freedom that, for the sake of their moral and spiritual clarity, I must set aside. I used to set aside my freedom all the time when my kids were young; setting an example became a holy habit. For love's sake, help me love all people as I loved my kids when they were young and impressionable—with charity before liberty.

### 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

#### The Problem: Charity before liberty

Let me use my own life as an example of what I mean by charity before liberty. I am "free." In fact, I am a sent one—the resurrected Jesus personally gave me a mission, as you know because y'all are the fruit of my labors! (Some may question whether I am truly sent by Jesus because I did not encounter him during his earthly life, but y'all know better, as you are the proof in the pudding that my mission and ministry are Abba-blessed.)

So if I wanted to make use of my freedom, I would be within my rights! As a laborer in Abba's vineyards I deserve to eat and drink and marry, just like Peter and the other sent ones and even Jesus' own brothers. Barnabas and I are not the only ones, of all the sent ones, who should be denied good things, bereft of blessing, and forced to toil with our hands to pay bills and put food in our bellies. If we work, we are allowed to expect payment, like soldiers who are paid by Caesar or the owner of a vineyard who eats the grapes she harvests or even shepherds who drink the sheep's milk.

I give these human examples, but it is also Abba's Word who commands the same:

Putting a muzzle on an ox while it is eating is a good way to lose an eye!<sup>33</sup>

Abba is more concerned about we who are as his beloved children than about the oxen. This Word is for all of us, to remind us that all who work deserve to be paid—those who plow and plant share in the harvest. As this is true for food for our physical bodies, so also is it true for those who plow and plant spiritual seeds and harvest a spiritual blessing, which is to say Barnabas and I have a right to be paid! We need to eat and have a roof over our heads. Indeed, those who harvest spiritual blessings deserve to be paid all the more. This is our right. This is our freedom.

But we did not use this right. We emptied ourselves of its privilege. We put up with all manner of guff rather than cause the Good News of Jesus the Anointed to be tainted with even the merest whiff of complaint or criticism. We didn't have to deny ourselves the use of this right. As those in Jerusalem's Temple eat the food offered on the altar, so does Abba command that those who proclaim Good News receive a just and living wage.

But, again, I have not used these rights. (To be clear, I am not writing in the hope you will start to pay me a wage. I would rather die than have someone take from me my boast that I proclaim Good News for free. Indeed, I cannot even boast about that because I am compelled to proclaim Good News! My tongue would shrivel in my mouth if I refused to tell the Story of what Abba has done, is doing and will do through Jesus the Anointed.) My point in saying all this is to make clear: I do not use my rights. I proclaim Abba's truth voluntarily, using my freedom to speak words of love not for payment but for pleasure—for the pure, unadulterated joy of speaking to others the Good News that Abba has entrusted to me.

*Rights  
responsible liberty  
free to bless  
practicing stewardship with humility  
possibilities*

God, it's me. I get it: what seems like a detour<sup>34</sup> is Paulos telling us about his own use of freedom—the right to say yes provides for him the ability to say no. I hear in Paulos' story a delight in letting go of his rights for the sake of others' blessing. And in hearing the delight I am struck by the absence of complaint. Paulos is not complaining about not getting paid as much as he revels in his ability to decline all gifts—no

whining, no complaints, no "I better get what I deserve." I am chagrined, Abba, as I consider my own tightly held list of "receipts payable." I shudder as I consider how easy it is for me to drift mindlessly into a sense of entitlement, selling my birthright in freedom for a cup of porridge.<sup>35</sup>

## 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

### Foundational Theology: Encouraging others

I am free! No one "owns" me, and I am beholden to no one. And yet, still, I choose to serve everyone so that I might connect with them, seeking to win their hearts through love. I relate to Jews in ways they will find respectful and so observe the rituals and laws of their tradition. Not that I must do this or have to do this—I choose to do this in order to win their hearts through love. My observance of Jewish rituals and laws is not required of me, for I am obligated only to the Law of Jesus which is the Law of Love.

If another's trust or understanding of the God-life is fragile, I mirror their fragility, coming alongside them to walk with them, to talk and to listen in ways that will open them to life with Imma. I seek to be respectful of all people and their customs so that I might know the honor of being Imma's servant. I choose servanthood so that I might share Imma's joy as their hearts are won through love.

I want to win the race I am running—I am speaking figuratively here, using a human illustration. Only the winner of the race gets the prize, which is why runners train, why they put their bodies through hardship. If runners train like this for a wreath that sits on the shelf and eventually gets tossed in the garbage, how much more should we desire to win a crown that will last forever? This is why I live the God-life with fervor, why I seek to dance to God-rhythms in everything I do. I am more than a mere runner training for a foot race or a fighter boxing with shadows. I am Imma's servant, so I struggle against my false self with all my might so that I might win the crown Imma will present to those who put their trust in her.

*Respect  
creating space  
listening, opening, connecting  
seeing another's imago dei<sup>36</sup>  
compassion*

God, it's me. I toil everyday for a wreath but long in my deepest soul for a crown. I expend myself for that which fades even while I know wisdom comes from your everlasting gifts, which must be sought, nurtured, and cherished until they become a part of who I am. Teach me, Imma, to run the correct race, the race that leads to you. Teach me as well that each person I encounter is your invitation for me to learn how to run the right way—with trust in your love for all of us, with empathy that sees hidden brokenness in both self and others, with humility that accepts being a servant as the way of Jesus.

## 1 Corinthians 10:1-22

### The Problem Restated: Culture or communion

The question of what we are to do when faced with temptation presented by the culture is real, difficult, and important. As those who belong to Jesus, we are to shun association with broken culture whenever possible, to the extent it is possible. I want you to be wise, beloved, regarding the example of our ancestors in the faith—the Israelites.<sup>37</sup> They belonged to Moses. It is as if they were baptized by their journey through the sea that Abba parted for them. Certainly they were shaped and formed by learning to follow Abba's cloud that led them in the wilderness. They ate spiritual food—the manna given by Abba. They drank spiritual drink—the water Abba gave from the rock. That rock symbolized Jesus, the Anointed One. And yet, even with such overwhelming blessings, Abba was not pleased with them, and many of them died as they wandered the wilderness.

The Israelites' experience is an example for us and a challenge to avoid giving our hearts to evil. Some of the Israelites gave their hearts to idols of mind or body:

Gluttony and drunkenness led to the worst kind of play.<sup>38</sup>

We also should not follow their example of sexual carousing, which led to many deaths. We should not walk in their steps by testing Abba, which led to even more deaths. We should not seek to imitate their grumbling and murmuring and complaining, which brought death rather than life. The example of their hardship and death are warnings for the faithful throughout the ages, and especially to us. Be aware and seek to stand rather than stumble!

Now, here is some good news: no temptation comes from the culture that is anything special—nothing you can't handle! Abba is always faithful with you and will guide you away from the temptation if it becomes too great. In fact, as you listen to Abba as he guides you, you will be shown the path to move away from the temptation, even if the path is difficult.

So, my dearest friends, flee the culture's brokenness and especially run away from anything—other than Abba—that invites you to give your heart to it. You all are wise and practical; judge for yourselves if my words make sense. The cup of thanksgiving we share together in worship is the path that leads us to participate in a mystical union with the blood Jesus shed for all. The bread we break together in worship is the sign and symbol that, though there are many of us, we are really all a part of the same Body. Our unity and oneness in Jesus is affirmed and celebrated.

So, because we share a holy communion with Abba and Jesus the Anointed, and because we share a holy community with one another, and because we share the high calling to express a holy compassion for the world, we should reject anything and everything that invites us to diminish our ideals, especially anything associated with pagan idols. Listen, we know the meat sacrificed to idols is just a bit of animal flesh, but it is also sacrificed by the pagan priest as an offering to satisfy demons. We cannot drink Abba's cup and mix in a little of the demonic. Nor can we feast at Abba's table and invite demons to join us. To play such games is to engage in a contest we cannot win. Abba will not be pleased if we try.

*Temptation  
forfeit integrity  
invitation to compromise  
lust, greed, rage, hiding  
No!*

God, it's me. Paulos makes himself clear: the high and holy calling to which we are called is also for me. It matters how I listen, how I speak, and how I act. Though the road is long, steep, and rocky, it matters what I do and how I do it. Both words and deeds, attitude and action, my tone and body language are as significant as the actual words I speak. I hear Paulos' words as aspirational: I represent you, Abba, when I encounter others. I hear them as the ideal: we

represent you when we act together. O Abba, give us strength! Give us courage! Help us to act beyond our own ability to love!

## 1 Corinthians 10:23 – 11:1

### A Personal Appeal: Be free, honor God

I know the pushback regarding what I have just written: “It is more idealistic than realistic, more aspirational than practical.” I know also some who argue, “My freedom means I can do whatever I want!” Yes, we are all free in Jesus the Anointed, but not everything serves Imma’s plan for reconciliation and wholeness for us and for all the creation: charity before liberty and others’ wellness before my license.

Here is my “realistic” and “practical” guidance. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without worry or concern for your conscience. As the Psalmist writes,

The entire Earth belongs to Imma, including you and me, the birds of the air and beasts in the sea, wheat and chaff, it’s all Imma’s sacred possession!<sup>39</sup>

And if a follower of the pagan gods invites you to dinner, go if you want. No worries, no concerns. However, if your friend says to you, “I offered this meat in worship to my deity. I gave my heart to a pagan god and used this meat to do it,” decline to partake in the meal to protect your friend’s conscience. It may not harm your heart to eat it because you know it is “just meat” and that idols are not actually “little gods.” Yet observe the rubric mentioned above: charity before liberty and others’ wellness before my license. For the sake of your friend, use your freedom to choose, and abstain.

Whatever you do when confronted with the difficult choices presented by the pagan culture, seek to honor Imma. Reflect Imma’s goodness and gift in your choices. Whether Jew or Greek, whether inside the gathering or out in the community, serve<sup>40</sup> others in ways that seek to win their hearts through love, all for Imma’s honor. Follow my example of using my freedom to serve others, just as I follow the example of Jesus who used his freedom to serve others.

*Glory<sup>41</sup>  
weighty love  
mirror of Imma  
shining light into darkness  
reflect*

God, it’s me. When did freedom become distorted into a caricature of itself? When did we start to think of our ability to choose as our highest ideal, as if we are the moral center of the universe? Or is that precisely the problem? If we think we are the center of all things, of course we will presume to prioritize our personal choices above all else. O Imma, realign my reality! Help me to see I am NOT the center of the universe. Help me to know you are the center and the edge and all that is beyond the universe. Help me to have a proper sense of my purpose and role: that I am most precious because I belong to you, and I am called to serve others because I belong to you. Because I belong to you, may my life reflect your glory and bring honor and praise to your Name.

## Fourth Essay: Men and Women in Worship

### 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

#### The Tradition: Men and women in the creation

I praise you for remembering what I have taught you from the Jewish traditions—the rabbis’ *Midrash*<sup>42</sup> on the Scriptures. Here is my interpretation, my *Midrash*. The origin<sup>43</sup> of man is Christ, the origin of woman is a man, the origin of Christ is Abba. As you know, servants in our culture cover their heads in front of their masters as a sign of respect, which is why Jewish men cover their head while leading worship. You also know that Jesus taught his disciples, we are no longer servants but friends.<sup>44</sup> Friends do not cover their heads in front of one another. Thus, men who lead worship should not cover their heads because we are friends of Abba.

But what about women who lead in worship? What should they do? This is more problematic, as you know, because people in both Greek and Jewish culture believe women with their heads uncovered are prostitutes. If a woman leads worship without a head covering, people will be scandalized and distracted from the good words she

speaks. One solution would be for the woman to shave her head! However, if she doesn't want to go to this extreme, wearing a head covering is a simple, practical solution to solve the problem of people's misperception.<sup>45</sup>

Remember that all humankind, both men and women, reflect the image and glory of Abba, as it says in Genesis 1:

Then Abba created humanity—male and female he created them.<sup>46</sup>

Remember also that in Genesis 2 the climax of creation was not a man but a woman,<sup>47</sup> because the woman was created to save and to help the man.<sup>48</sup> And so, as the rabbis teach that the angels were present at creation to bear witness and praise for Abba's work, so also are the angels present for the new creation happening in Jesus, who is creating a new humanity and reconciling all the cosmos in love and friendship. So that you don't have to worry about what the angels might be thinking when women lead in worship, go ahead and just cover your head, please. Even if men don't cover their heads, women should.

That there is a different standard for men than for women is because of the culture and the way people see men, women, and themselves. Remember, though, we are all connected, woven together as a beautiful tapestry. Some men may say, "But Eve came from Adam!" To this I reply, "And what about you? Did you not have a mother?" And we all come from Abba, which is what really matters.

So judge for yourselves what is proper. Given all the assumptions in the culture around men, women, and sexuality, do we want people distracted by what they see or focused on what they hear? Both men and women leading worship should accommodate cultural expectations a little. "Use your freedom to promote harmony in the gathering" is what I teach everywhere I go.

*Covering*  
*humble, adaptive*  
*patiently accepting necessity*  
*resisting, refusing, defying. Enough!*  
*Accommodation*

God, it's me. I feel for my sisters. It is so unfair! I, a male pastor, presume the respect of my congregation and have rarely been disappointed. My sisters, female pastors, too often have had to fight for every ounce

of respect they receive. Abba, I appreciate Paulos trying to walk the thin line between Gospel integrity and cultural necessity, between the full-throated proclamation of gender equality and the pragmatic steps required in his day. The journey has taken too long and been detoured too many times. I join my sisters in saying, "Enough!" What can I do, Abba, to be the change I want to see not only for my sisters and friends but also for others who miss out on some Spirit-led pastoral leadership?

## 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

### The Problem: Selfishness at the Lord's Supper

I offer no praise in what I am about to say about your gatherings: they destroy rather than edify, degrade rather than enrich, do more harm than good. The way I hear it, when you gather there is constant bickering! Do you really argue constantly about which of you most has Imma's approval? And I am appalled by what happens when you gather, allegedly, for the Lord's Supper. Let me be clear: what you are doing is not the Lord's Supper, for the wealthy among you bring feasts to stuff their own faces while beloved who are poor—your own siblings in Christ—go without. While some remain hungry, others get drunk! And you think this mirrors the meal Jesus gave his followers? You think this helps you remember Jesus' sacrificial death? You think this honors Jesus' self-emptying love? I am speechless! I hardly know where to begin. I certainly cannot praise you.

*Dysfunctional*  
*broken, fractured*  
*shame expressing outward*  
*creating heartache and heartburn*  
*sick*

God, it's me. I often wonder if the modern church is too dysfunctional for you to use. We have so many divisions, too many difficult people in our midst. Too often do we fail to love our neighbor, too easily do we distort the words of Jesus into a caricature of Gospel calling. So I take solace when I read about the Corinthians. Imma, if you can use them to transform an Empire, what might you do if we were to become faithful to your calling upon our lives? Upon my life?

## 1 Corinthians 11:23-34

### Foundational Theology I: Lord's Supper

I gave to you the tradition I received from Jesus the Anointed, who was betrayed. In betrayal's shadow, Jesus took the Passover bread and gave thanks to Abba for it. And when he broke the Passover bread to share with his family—those followers who had remained steadfast with him—he did not recite the traditional words of the Seder meal but instead offered something new: “This bread is my body, offered up for you. Give thanks and break it, share and eat it—do it as a way of remembering me.” In a similar manner, Jesus raised the cup after the meal, the third of four cups in the Seder ritual, the cup known as “The Cup of Redemption,” and said, “Here is the new covenant of which the truth-teller Jeremiah spoke.<sup>49</sup> Yes, my blood is spilled for redemption to forgive sins. Drink from this cup as a way of re-membering me.”<sup>50,51</sup>

So is this “just” a meal or even “just” a ritual? Not at all! Instead, this ritual meal is proclamation and celebration! In breaking the bread and sharing the cup, we proclaim Jesus as sovereign above Caesar! We remember his death and we hope for his return, longing for it. So, eating *this* bread and drinking *this* cup is no light matter but serious business—spiritual business. Take this to heart: discern your motives in sharing Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. To be united with Jesus the Anointed is both perfect gift and sacred offering of our lives in service to Abba. Those who eat the “body,” as in the bread, without cognizance and care for the “Body”—the gathering of fellow believers—dishonor Jesus and themselves. Perhaps the reason some among you are sick or have died is because you have neglected your sacred duty to care for each other, to ensure all have enough to eat and shelter from life's storms?<sup>52</sup> Perhaps if we all were more faithful in self-examination, we as Abba's gathered saints would reflect the love to which we are called? Perhaps our feeling the Spirit's conviction is Abba's discipline? Perhaps we are being reminded that we have not been chosen to participate in the world's brokenness, but in Abba's blessing?

Instead of your current practice, I prefer that when you share a meal—whether it is a ritual celebration or a simple feast—share it as one, as a unity, to express your oneness in Jesus, with him at the center of your gathering. If you are famished and cannot wait until the gathering meets, eat at home so as not to damage the unity of the Body. When I see you face-to-face, I'll give you more instructions about ways to preserve and reflect your unity.

*Communion  
unity, intimacy  
friendship with mystery  
celebrating past, present, and future  
Body*

God, it's me. As I write this, it is December 2020. We are eight months into COVID-19. And by “we” I mean not just me and my family, nor my church family, nor our nation, but all the world—our unity made manifest by a virus. I admit I had taken for granted simple pleasures: shaking hands, hugging, seeing another's entire face, sharing a meal and a glass of wine. I understand these social niceties now in a new way, Abba. I will not take them for granted again. Even more, though I appreciate pastors' and churches' many liturgical adaptations, though I have come to enjoy “Zoom Church,” I will not take for granted the privilege of sharing in the Lord's Supper face-to-face. May our oneness reflect a spiritual concord seemingly absent in our nation and in many of our churches. May our unity be rebuilt, heart by heart, hug by hug, handshake by handshake, in a world where we will have learned that physical mask-wearing saves lives, but spiritual mask-wearing is the way of death.

## 1 Corinthians 12:1-30

### Foundational Theology II: Spiritual gifts

I want you to understand about Imma's gifts given through the Divine Spirit to you, my beloved. The Spirit's gifts are not like what you experienced when you were pagan and gave your hearts to idols. Idols have no power, but the Divine Spirit has great power—influence, guidance, and conviction. No one who curses Jesus is under the Spirit's influence and no one who proclaims, “Jesus is sovereign above Caesar!” does so without the Divine Spirit active and alive upon them and through them.

So let me tell you how the Divine Spirit works in us all. Many gifts there are—a variety of colors and chords, an abundance of harmony and holiness—and all of them, each and every gift, is borne of the Spirit. Many ways to serve can be found—through work and worship, heart and hand—and every form is intended to honor Imma and

build up goodness for all. If Imma is not honored or if good is not brought to all, it is not the influence of Imma's Divine Spirit at work.

The Divine Spirit gives an assortment of gifts, a veritable fruit basket of blessing: knowledge and wisdom, faith and healing, the power to act and the power to proclaim, the ability to discern, to describe, and to decipher the longings of Imma's heart. All these gifts come from the Divine Spirit; they are not earned but given, a gift, and always given for a purpose: to bring honor to Imma and wholeness to all.

Members of the gathering are each given their own gift, and the source is always the same: Imma's Divine Spirit. The gifts differ from person to person, but the same Spirit is always the giver. We are each part of a larger Body—no matter who we are or where we come from, our gender, race, and nationality do not make us separate from one another. We all belong to Imma and are a part of her family. We are all baptized into Imma's love, chosen and claimed, sprinkled with water and sealed by the Spirit. We are one Body.

Can you imagine how ridiculous it would sound if your foot and eye started to argue about who was most a part of your body? What if they claimed their independence from the body? That would be absurd! There are many parts that make up our one body. Likewise, what if all the body was just an eye or just an ear? We would be a pretty sorry sight—completely unable to hear or see or smell, depending on what sense was lost. Again, that would be absurd! But Imma is kind. She has given us many parts to our body so that, when woven together by eons of evolution, DNA expressing itself in ever more complex forms, we become a marvel. Likewise, we who are one part of the gathering, when woven together by the Divine Spirit, make one Body.

We all know the eye cannot shun the hand nor the head spurn the feet. In fact, rather than shunning and spurning the different parts our body, what do we do? We protect the weak and honor the needy. We support those of modest means and are less concerned for those who need no special help. Just like Imma does, we protect the honor of the humble and work vigorously to ensure equality toward one another. We understand that if one part of the Body suffers, all suffer. Just as if one part of the Body rejoices, all rejoice.

You exist to be the Body of Jesus in this world—and each and every one of y'all is a part of that Body! No one is excluded, left behind, or discarded. And each of y'all

has a job to do for Jesus' work in the world and for building up the Body, to make the Body strong and whole. This is why Imma's Divine Spirit has given so many gifts related to worship, for worship builds up the Body. The Divine Spirit gives gifts to the sent ones, to call the gathering into existence; to truth-tellers, to ensure the people confront what's really happening in the world; to teachers who can help the gathering understand what Imma does through Jesus the Anointed; and then, Imma gives people all manner of other gifts: to provide healing and wholeness, to discern and direct, to encourage us to wonder and empower us to experience awe. Not everyone is sent. Nor are all called to serve as truth-tellers. Not all can teach. Nor can everyone perform acts of profound compassion. Different people have different knowledge, different wisdom, different abilities to convey the God-rhythms of the God-life.

*Gifts  
embracing good  
building the Body  
given by God for  
service*

God, it's me. As one who was born, grew up, and have lived my entire life in the fertile soil of western individualism, I find I crave being a part of community. As a youth, I met this need playing sports on teams. As an adult, I sought the companionship of a life mate. I find the older I get the more I realize the gift that is the gathering of your children. We are a motley crew, perhaps, and yet your love is present in our midst. Together we are part of something larger than ourselves. Together we support each other. Together we encourage the lost, the lonely, the ones longing to find a safe place in this world. Together we serve friend and enemy, neighbor, and stranger. Together we are one because you live in us and we live in you. We are better together.

### **1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:13**

#### **Foundational Theology III: Love**

Yearn for the greater gifts. Yes, some gifts are better than others! Let me tell you about these gifts, so all of you will know the Way of Jesus, for this Way is

illuminated and empowered by Abba's Divine Spirit. These gifts are given to influence, guide and convict all who receive them to seek this most excellent Way.

If I talk the talk but do not walk the walk, if love does not motivate and permeate all that I do, then I am like the brass crafters in Corinth whose tents are lumped together. As they create their wares, what a racket they make!<sup>53</sup> If I have a truth-teller's speech and a mystic's vision, if my faith can create blessing both above and below the mountains,<sup>54</sup> but I lack love, who cares about my "abilities"? They are worthless. If I give and give and give to the poor, but I lack love, my giving gains me nothing. If I guard my purity of thought, body, and spirit, but I lack love, my purity profits me nothing.

Love is a moral choice. Choosing the good for the sake of the good is the way Abba loves; it is called *agape*<sup>55</sup> and it endures with kindness. *Agape* rejects the path of ego: putting oneself above another. *Agape* rejects the path of animosity: putting another down in order to raise oneself up. *Agape* discovers joy in neither malice nor meanness, but rejoices whenever anyone lives fully, completely, and wholly into the God-life. *Agape* is forever fierce in its care for others, always sees the good in others, eternally trusts that Abba's goodness will win the day (no matter what day it is), and seems infinite in its ability to seek justice and joy for others' sake. *Agape* never quits, never surrenders, always pursues Abba's will.

The need for truth-tellers will cease when we stand before the One who claimed, "I am the Truth."<sup>56</sup> Languages will be no more when we all speak Abba's mother tongue. Being a "know-it-all" will be of no use, like waking sleepily from a dream that one cannot quite remember. For today and tomorrow, knowledge and truth are partial, but when the One who fills all that is seen and unseen comes, when Abba's kin-dom steps from the shadows into the eternal light that cannot be defeated, then all that is partial will be no more. Yet Abba's fullness will remain.

There is a time and place for all things: childhood for the children and adulthood for the adults. When I was a kid, everything was simple: my speech, my thoughts, my ability to reason. When I became a man, I left the simple behind, for I understood life is more complex than my childish ways could fathom. How much more is eternity still to be revealed, to be understood, to be embraced. Like looking into a distorted mirror do we see Abba's eternity today, but the time will come when we stand before the One who is sovereign above Caesar—then we will

experience an intimacy with Abba like the knowing he has always had for us. In that kairos moment, which will extend into all eternity, all that will be left of all the Divine Spirit's gifts are these three: trust, hope and *agape*. And the greatest gift both to give and receive is *agape*.

*Agape*  
*enduring blessing*  
*creating beauty everywhere*  
*giving, sharing, laughing, rejoicing*  
*love*

God, it's me. So unworthy am I of receiving *agape*. Perhaps that is why the Church names *agape* as a gift, as a blessing, as that which can only be received and welcomed. I am not okay, and my fellow believers are not okay, but we are all alright in the love of Jesus—the source of our comfort, joy, and hope. O Abba, how grateful I am for these "greater gifts" of your Divine Spirit! Help me so to trust in your goodness that I may live forward toward hope. Help me to so hope in the fullness of your promised light, life and love that I might live forward in love. Help me so to love that I might teach others to trust.

## 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

### The Problem Restated I: Building the Body

Crave *agape* that you may walk the Way of Jesus. Covet the gifts Imma's Divine Spirit gives, which help you so to walk both now and in the days to come. As for the lesser gifts, for now desire the gift of truth-telling. Spiritual languages speak only to Imma, not people. People may say, "Oooh!" and "Ahh!" but do so without comprehension, for only Imma understands the words she herself has given you to speak. You may be impressed with yourself, but you will not build up the gathering.

Truth-tellers build up the gathering. They speak truth to power, comfort to the troubled, and hope to all.<sup>57</sup> Speaking a personal, spiritual language is enjoyable—I wish for everyone to have their own private chat with Imma that explores mysteries too vast for the human mind. As personally enjoyable as having a personal, spiritual language might be, however, truth-telling is more helpful to the Body. Build the Body before devoting time to private conversations that help no one but yourself.

Beloved, spiritual languages spoken in public have their place only if another is present to translate them. Such an interpreter may build the Body by helping the gathering hear Imma's word. Otherwise, the spiritual language spoken in public is no better than the trumpeter playing random notes. Only when the trumpeter clearly blows out, "Charge!" do soldiers surge into battle. In a similar manner, a private spiritual language is useless to the gathering and inspires no one to acts of love. Every language means something to someone; the peoples of many nations all understand their mother tongue. But a language means nothing to those without comprehension. This is why I implore you to yearn for the gifts of the Divine Spirit that build up the Body, that help the entire Body to excel in love.

*Edify  
speak truth  
comprehension for compassion  
strengthen the Body's foundation  
build*

God, it's me. I like the idea of having "tongues." I feel as if they would be spiritual bona fides, proving that I'm really a Jesus follower. But even as I say this, I know: faith, hope and love are superior. Imma, teach me to love. Even as I still secretly wish for spiritual bona fides, I know: speaking truth to power, comfort to the troubled, and hope to all, is far more useful. Imma, teach me to build the Body. Even more, Imma, teach me to want to love and to want to build up others more than I long for spiritual gloss that profits only my ego.

## 1 Corinthians 14:13-25

### The Problem Restated II: Building up unbelievers

Because the purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the Body to excel in love, anyone speaking a spiritual language should ask Abba for the ability to translate their speech for others. Praying with my spirit is good but lacks wholeness, for my mind is idle. Singing with my spirit is joyful yet singing with spirit and understanding leads me to holiness. If you pray or sing in a language that you alone speak—and even then you cannot understand it!—you drive a wedge between yourself and others who desire to say, "So be it!" to your thanksgiving. You give thanks and no one is

built up! Your spirit acts all religified but no one is edified! Where is the good in such a practice?

I thank God I speak in spiritual languages; indeed, more than all y'all do. But in the gathering, five words the Body can understand are better than five speeches in a spiritual language no one comprehends. Beloved, in regard to evil, be like babes. In your comprehension, be mature, wise, and thoughtful. The truth-teller Isaiah spoke Abba's message when he said,

Through languages my people do not understand,  
words dripping from the lips of the *goyyim*,  
I will speak to them, and they will not listen.<sup>58</sup>

Spiritual languages aren't really for those who already believe, who know and are known by Jesus the Anointed.<sup>59</sup> Rather, they serve as a sign to those who do not yet trust in Jesus, showing them that Abba's Divine Spirit is at work and is all around them. However, speaking truth is for those who already trust in Jesus, to encourage them by speaking truth to power, comfort to the troubled, and hope to all. Those who do not yet trust in Jesus the Anointed nor confess him to be sovereign above Caesar, are not prepared to receive the truth, comfort, and hope proclaimed in the gathering. And yet, conversely, spiritual languages are a danger for those who do not trust in Jesus. Can you imagine what such a person would think to enter the gathering and hear everyone speaking a different language? The cacophony would cause them to run away fast and hard. They might think we are crazy! However, if that same person entered the gathering while someone was speaking the truth, their brokenness might be revealed to them, their heart turned inside-out, and in that very moment they might stand before the judgment seat of the Holy One. This would be for their blessing, for they would fall face down before the throne of loving-kindness to confess, "Abba! Abba! I see Abba in the gathering!"

*Unknowing  
mystery hidden  
desiring the numinous  
yet cannot leap into  
light*

God, it's me. The purpose of gifts sounds so straightforward, so direct: gifts are for building up our capacity to love. Don't use Abba's gifts to exploit, abuse, or

confuse. KISS—keep it simple, saints! Why then are spiritual gifts so often divisive? Is it my ego—that I want to show others I am special? Is it my doubt—that I want to show myself you are real? Is it my lack of compassion or concern or care—that the purpose of gifts is lost or forgotten or ignored? Abba, teach me to use the gift of your love I have received with wisdom and compassion. Grant that I may glorify you with the gifts received from your hand and enjoy every step of the journey.

### 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

#### Personal Appeal: Orderly worship

To summarize, sisters and brothers, when you gather to worship Imma, conduct yourselves decently and in good order. You can't all talk at once, sing at once, or pray at once. One stands to speak truth while another stands bellowing a spiritual language while still another offers an interpretation simultaneously. What chaos! Take your turn!

You should limit spiritual languages to two or at most three people, and only allow them if there is someone to translate to the entire Body. As I said above, everything you do must be done to build up the Body. If no one is present to translate the spiritual language, the person shall keep silent in the gathering. If they want to have a private chat with Imma, they can, so long as no one else is disturbed.

The same limit should be observed with those who stand to speak truth: two or three at the most. The same order should also be observed: take your turn! While truth-tellers can be understood by all, you don't want to overwhelm the gathering with a tsunami of knowledge, facts, and wisdom. The mind, heart, and spirit can only absorb so much at one time before it shuts down. So control yourselves. Imma loves wholeness, not chaos. Indeed, Imma took the primordial chaos and shaped and formed it into an orderly creation. All the gatherings of Imma's flock observe and celebrate likewise.

Now, as you know, our gatherings mirror the architecture of the Jerusalem Temple, which causes a practical dilemma. The men are separated from the women, with the men in front and the women in the back, and the women cannot always hear what is being said. I empathize with the women but must insist they remain quiet, so as not to disturb the gathering. I appreciate their

desire to learn, but if they cannot hear what is being said, let them ask their male family members at home about the lesson rather than engage in idle chatter.<sup>60</sup>

The word of Imma did not originate with you, nor has it journeyed to your ears only. For those who fancy themselves to be wise or knowledgeable or especially gifted with Imma's Divine Spirit, let them affirm what I am saying as Imma's purpose and charge to her children. Those who will not affirm my wisdom are without knowledge.<sup>61</sup> So to summarize again: allow spiritual languages only under appropriate circumstances, prefer truth-telling, and do everything decently and in good order.

*Worship  
orderly truth  
telling the story  
celebrating the Good News  
PRAISE!*

God, it's me. I am grateful to be a Presbyterian. We might be called "The Frozen Chosen," but we know how to worship decently and in good order—1 Corinthians 14:40 is our jam! And yet sometimes our order becomes an idol, and our desire for "decency" has us descend toward "ornery"—as many a worship committee will attest. Imma, while I love to dance to the God-rhythms of a Presbyterian waltz, teach me to be open to a Methodist sock hop or even a Vineyard break dance. Lead me toward the deepest rhythms of your Divine Spirit—praise that leads to offering compassion and thanksgiving that leads to seeking justice.

### Fifth Essay: Resurrection

#### 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

##### The Tradition: Witnesses to the resurrection

Now let me tell you what you already know: The Good News is its own authority and acts upon us even as we act to receive it—Abba at work through his Divine Spirit and us acting in trust and commitment, clinging desperately to the God-life as our only hope in life and in death.<sup>62,63</sup> Our hope will not disappoint us, so our trust is well placed.

I was given the precise sequence of what happened to Jesus and through Jesus as the Anointed of Abba: When he died, the power of sin was broken and its guilt removed, just as our Hebrew Bible teaches about such things; then he was placed in a burial cave according to our Jewish custom; then Abba acted upon him to infuse him with life, just as our Hebrew Bible teaches would happen; and then he started to make appearances. He showed up! Peter saw him and perceived the truth that Jesus is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>64</sup> Jesus revealed himself to his core followers—they saw him, too. A bit later, five hundred of the beloved discovered the truth of death turning to life in, through, and because of Jesus. Most of these folks are still alive, (though some have entered into life eternal), so you can ask them about what they witnessed if you want. Jesus appeared to his brother James, then all the sent ones saw him alive, and, last of all, he appeared to me, as to one born for this moment yet unworthy to bear it, for I was callous and cocky, and I tortured members of the gathering. Only by Abba's gift was I allowed such a privilege, and it changed me! I am a transformed man, a man on fire, ready and willing to work harder for this Good News than anyone alive—yet it isn't me alone, of course, for I am empowered by Abba's gift, which worked in, upon, and through me.<sup>65</sup> It is of no matter—I don't need any credit—whether it was me or Peter or any other sent one. What matters is what we saw, what we witnessed, what we testified to you. And it is the source of your trust, the only source.

*Witness  
see, perceive  
seeing is believing  
perceiving leads to life  
evidence*

God, it's me. I stand not on the shoulders of giants but on the testimony of witnesses, a parade of saints, each singing your praise, a veritable choir of promised hope that life anew and life eternal is my destiny. From generation to generation, century to century, age to age, the "apostolic succession" marches forth: built upon a foundation of witness that "He is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!" Though I personally have not seen my resurrected Lord, I am blessed to believe. Blessed because it gives me hope. Blessed because it fills me with purpose. Blessed because even in a year like we just had—yes, even in 2020—this blessing teaches

me to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. In living more deeply into this blessing I discover anew that life conquers death and the promise of Jesus will prevail. This is my hope. This is your Good News.

## 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

### The Problem: Some preach Christ is not raised

Now here is the dilemma: I hear that some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead. I want to be kind here because I know this is the teaching of some Jewish sects, (though not all), and that even among those Jews who teach resurrection, what happened in Jesus is not what they expected.<sup>66</sup> Further, some Greek philosophers ridicule the notion of resurrection because they perceive the material world to be irredeemably corrupt, while other Greeks associate resurrection with becoming like a star in the night sky.<sup>67</sup> However, to say there is no resurrection is specifically and irreconcilably in contradiction to our preaching.

If there is no resurrection, that includes Jesus, too! If there is no resurrection, our preaching is useless. If there is no resurrection, your trust in Jesus as Imma's Anointed and the sovereign above Caesar is a mere mirage. Worst of all, if there is no resurrection, we can be indicted as liars about Imma, for we proclaim that she raised Jesus from death to life. If there is no resurrection, this indictment will be sustained, and we are left only with our guilt, as are you. If there is no resurrection, our siblings in Jesus who "sleep," those whom we call the great Communion of the Saints, are lost to us forever. If there is no resurrection, we live only for today and tomorrow, with eternity a dream forgotten in the morning. What pitiful people we would be to trust ourselves, body and soul, to a lie.

*Philosophies  
constructing puzzles  
mind seeking understanding  
imagining what might be  
guesstimation*

God, it's me. I confess, Easter is my favorite Christian celebration—the music, the joy, the hope, little girls and boys dressed in their Sunday finest. I confess, too, that I have little tolerance for those who preach Easter as mere "spiritual renewal" of our hopes and dreams. This is not the biblical witness! Yet in hearing Paul again I hear him anew—there have always been

those who struggled with the message, for it is once-in-a-lifetime, once-in-all-history. Of course it is difficult to believe! Abba, as Paulos showed compassion on those of his day, taking the time to address their doubts and confusion and fear, so may I offer myself to you, that you may build within me a like compassion as I walk with people in my day. Help me know how best to tell this Good News: He is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

## 1 Corinthians 15:20-34

### Foundational Theology: First fruits

As the farmer harvests the first crops that ripen, so Abba plucked Jesus first to journey from death to life, a new kind of humanity. As the mother calls her child home for the family feast, so Abba spoke into the Abyss and breathed upon Jesus, inanimate flesh being infused with the rhythms of eternity, a model of humanity made whole and complete. As Adam brought death into the creation, so Jesus became the Healer and Restorer of Life, weaving together body and spirit and soul into a perfect tapestry. As the man, Adam, walked with life into death, so the man, Jesus, ushered death back to its abyss and walked with life into eternity.

Now each happens and will happen in its turn: Jesus, the first fruit of the harvest, then upon his second advent those who have been claimed by him, and then the fulfillment of all his kin-dom when the rule of Abba's sovereign love puts an end to all misdirected authority, all misaligned power, all misplaced allegiances. For Jesus will persevere as sovereign above Caesar until every allegiance is won, every power is aligned, and every authority submits to the rule of Abba's sovereign love, with the final enemy to fall being death itself.

The Psalmist spoke of Jesus' work as sovereign when he said,

Abba is carving a footstool for the Anointed;  
Upon it the Anointed will elevate his feet;  
All that was, is, and will be for the Anointed's rest.<sup>68</sup>

I do not mean the Anointed's feet will rest upon Abba!<sup>69</sup> "All that is, was, and will be" cannot refer to the One from whom the gift is received. Instead, when all is given to Jesus it will be his joy to return it to Abba, placing the footstool at his feet so that Abba may fill all time, fulfill all truth, and be the fullness of all creation itself.<sup>70</sup>

Now all this talk about footstools and Abba being the fullness of creation itself is to make a point: none of this is possible if death reigns supreme! If Abba did not infuse Jesus' inanimate flesh with the God-rhythms of life, thereby forming and transforming him into a new kind of humanity, what is the purpose of baptism?<sup>71</sup> Baptism is the sacrament of identity that teaches us to whom we belong—that in body and in soul, in life and in death, we belong not to ourselves but to our faithful Healer and Restorer of Life. Baptism is the sign, the symbol, and the seal that the God-life is at work upon us—even we who are as good as dead when left to our own strength, with our only hope being Abba's gift and promise.

It is Abba's gift and promise of the God-life transforming death that infuses us with courage to endanger our lives to share the Good News of what Abba has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus. Every hour, every day, fighting wild beast in Ephesus, (confronting hostile crowds, too), only Abba's gift and promise sustain our strength, our will to endure, and our conviction. But if death reigns supreme,

Party time! Let's get down, get funky!

Live hard, die young, leave a good-looking corpse.<sup>72</sup>

Don't kid yourselves: as the Greek philosopher Menander has written, "Rotting corpses create a stink even upon the good." Indeed, shake yourselves! Clear your heads of all the crazy talk that leads you to wallow in brokenness and whose end is despair. Some of you are utterly clueless about dancing to God-rhythms and the power of the God-life. In the midst of Abba's gathering this must neither be nor abide nor endure.

*Resurrection  
God's promise  
walking into hope  
eternity as unbound horizon  
LIFE!*

God, it's me. The New Year has come: 2021! And as I write this prayer, COVID-19 has taken an enormous toll: 360,000 lives in my own country and two million lives globally. What is the hope you have for them and for we who love them—for all of us who will one day accompany them into the grave? Abba, the hope of resurrection is neither opiate for the masses nor

religion's great delusion but palpable hope. I long—we long—to be with you. I thank you, we thank you that you long to be with us. And death cannot deny your word. He is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

### 1 Corinthians 15:35-49

#### The Problem Revisited: What kind of body?

I know there are some who wonder, “If Imma has raised Jesus from death to life, as you say, what happened? What form did Jesus take? Did he look and feel the same or was he somehow different?” Don’t be silly! Death follows life and then life leaves death in the dust. Just as plain, what goes into the ground is not like what comes up. If you plant a seed, say barley or hops, the seed that is planted is unlike the fruit that sprouts. In like manner, just as Imma determines its new form, so she determined Jesus’ new and eternal life.<sup>73</sup>

Each plant and every animal has its own form, a body gifted to it by Imma, with form and function woven together into a beautiful thing. Birds of the air and fish of the sea, lions, tigers, and bears—oh my—each has been given its own beauty. In like manner, there are bodies bound to the human plain and bodies liberated for the heavenly realm, bodies chained to earthly existence and bodies who both embrace the earthly and also transcend it. Each is radiant in its own way, just as sun and moon and stars each shine as Imma has determined.

In like manner are those who receive the gift of resurrection to eternal life. The body that is sown perishes and Imma raises it imperishable. Sown in dishonor, Imma raises it in awe. Sown in weakness, Imma raises it with *dunamis*! What is chained to the earthly plane is raised to the heavenly realm.

The body Imma raised is still a body, both embracing the earthly and transcending it. The body Imma gives in resurrection reverses Adam’s curse, taking us from “dust to dust and to dust you shall return”<sup>74</sup> to the heights of heaven, from mere existence to God-life whole and complete, from “today and tomorrow and then we die” to eternity’s horizon and beyond. We have borne Adam’s image, reflecting the dulled visage of an old humanity, speaking in muted voice, seeing with opaque vision. But now, in the fulfillment of Imma’s gift of new and eternal life, we will reflect the new humanity, singing praise in clear harmonies, with eyes to behold her beauty face-to-face.

*Resurrection  
“transphysical” life<sup>75</sup>  
bodily, yet unfettered  
body and soul harmony  
harvest*

God, it’s me. I quiver in awe and quake with reverence: your promise is beyond my imagination but not beyond my trust. I cannot envision what will be, but I have placed my confidence in you, that your plan is whole and complete, fulfilled according to your will, not my whim. I rest assured, even as the world turns upside-down through pandemic and protest. I rest assured, even as sorrow and joy commingle in a swirl of hurt, healing and hope. I rest assured, I rest assured, I rest assured, for He is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

### 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

#### Personal Appeal: Strong and firm

Beloved, let me tell it to you slant:<sup>76</sup> sinew and strength are no substitute for Abba’s gift and fragile flesh cannot endure eternity. That which rots in the earth does not soar to the heavens. Hear me! Listen and I will initiate you into Abba’s hidden counsel:<sup>77</sup> Not all will pass through death, but all will be transformed. It will happen lickety-split. When you least expect it, Abba’s trumpet will sound: Charge! And the dead will rise, rise and receive the transformation that awaits those who have been claimed by Abba—to live life without corruption in heart or hands, in mind or body, in soul or spirit.

This is divine necessity: that we cover our scruffy selves with a divine garment—eternal and enduring, light and life and love woven into majestic tapestry. Then Isaiah, the truth-teller’s words from ages past will be fulfilled:

Abba dined upon death,  
and it was a meal never again to be served!<sup>78</sup>  
Or again, the truth-teller Hosea wrote:

Hey! Death! You’re a LOSER!  
Hey! Death! I ain’t afraid of you!<sup>79</sup>

Death need only be feared among those swimming in Sin River, whose current flows toward the raging sea. But thanks be to Abba, who sent Jesus the Anointed—Lifeguard

to All—who brings us safely to the riverbank, to the steps of Abba’s kin-dom.

So, my dearest and beloved, let nothing move you from this core conviction: Abba has turned the entire cosmos inside-out in Jesus the Anointed. This is the divinely mandated sit-in:<sup>80</sup> We shall overcome someday because of what Abba has done, is doing, and will do! So whether sitting or standing, whether walking or running, whether crafting just policy or creating sublime art, be confident your work contributes to Abba’s plan and your work makes a difference.

*Resurrection  
Abba’s poetry  
initiation into LIFE  
knitted together in Jesus  
Amen!*

God, it’s me. The moon sets on my despair. Dawn rises when hope shall embrace fulfillment and he whom I cannot imagine will reveal himself to me—so obvious in hindsight. I relish the anticipation of that moment when my eyes will see truth and my ears will hear conviction and my voice will sing praise and my heart will be whole as if for the very first time. Even as I long for that day, I know I have work to do here and now—for you have called me to till the soil, to plant and water, and most of all, to harvest. Until that day, may I be found doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with you, Abba, my Lord and my God.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ken Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*. (Inter-Varsity Press Academic: Downers Grove, IL: 2011), pp. 33-53.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-32.

<sup>3</sup> The rabbis believed in and participated in community in much more robust ways than we do today. Though gathered together into a book called *Talmud*, the rabbinic *midrash* should be imagined as the voices of two good, long-time friends sipping coffee together. The two rabbis agree at first, then one of them says something the other cannot abide. Before long they are engaging in high-intensity, high-volume argumentation about the meaning of a text of Scripture. Anyone who has heard Middle Easterners talk to one another in Arabic knows such conversation may be discomfiting to Western ears—it is not the heat of battle but the thrill of engagement with God’s Word that drives such conversation. This is *midrash!*

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word used is *apostoleos*, which usually is translated as apostle, from the verb meaning to send; thus sent one.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek word used is *charis*, which is usually translated as grace but also carries the connotation of gift.

<sup>6</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>7</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus’ authority as above Caesar’s authority.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as holy and literally means set apart—both set apart from and set apart for.

<sup>10</sup> *Dunamis* is the Greek word for power, from which we also get the word “dynamite” and “dynamic.” It seemed appropriate to paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow God’s dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

<sup>11</sup> c.f. Isaiah 29:14.

<sup>12</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 9:24.

<sup>13</sup> c.f. also 1 Timothy 4:3.

<sup>14</sup> c.f. Isaiah 64:4.

<sup>15</sup> c.f. Isaiah 40:13.

<sup>16</sup> This phrase is intentionally vague, as it connotes multiple meanings: (1) dying to the false self, (2) consummation of our

baptism in death, and (3) Golly Gee! This stuff is hard and seems really difficult. These are two theological and one colloquial possibility for this phrase, though you may have others.

<sup>17</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer’s Fire.” Rather than Dante’s “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>18</sup> c.f. Job 5:13.

<sup>19</sup> c.f. Psalm 3:20.

<sup>20</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for “time,” and signifies the key moment, the transformational moment, as when a pregnant wife says to her husband, “Honey, it’s time.” *Kairos* is different from *chronos*, which marks chronological time.

<sup>21</sup> I would like to give a shout-out to my own “father in Jesus,” the Rev. Bill Robison, who took an ornery 17-year-old and taught him to love Jesus. Thanks, Pastor Bill!

<sup>22</sup> *En shallah* is Arabic for “God willing.” I chose to use this term, which is common among Arab Muslims, as a means to remind readers that Paulos, though a Roman citizen, was ethnically and culturally Semitic. I imagine if Paulos was writing Arabic, *en shallah* is what he might have said.

<sup>23</sup> Paulos referred to an earlier letter that has been lost to history! How many other letters did Paulos write of which we know neither their content nor existence?

<sup>24</sup> The impulse to isolate was most famously expressed by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who fled society to seek solitude and sanctity, with mixed results.

<sup>25</sup> “Set apart...from and for...” is the literal definition of the word *hagios*, which is usually translated as “holy.”

<sup>26</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7.

<sup>27</sup> That our very best efforts are yet tinged with sin is the definition of the Calvinist doctrine known as “total depravity.” Total depravity does not mean, as some think, that we are all like Jeffery Dahmer but that every part of our goodness is yet mired in self-interest and held back from perfection by our false self.

<sup>28</sup> Paulos referred to generic disputes, but I am grounding his argument in the original issue *du jour*—the presenting issue of a man sleeping with his father’s wife.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek word is *adikos*, which is a cognate of *dikaioisune*, usually translated as righteousness. However, the Hebraic roots are *tzedakah* and *mishpat*, which mean justice. I have chosen to use the more deeply rooted meaning of this “word cluster” in part because, in today’s modern church, “righteousness” is often associated with an individual’s moral and ethical behavior, while “justice” connotes a wider, societal, and collective perspective. It seems to me throughout 1 Corinthians that Paulos’ focus was on the Corinthians’ community and their relationship with the wider culture; thus, the collective “justice” seems most appropriate here.

<sup>30</sup> Paulos was inconsistent throughout this passage in his use of the singular and plural forms of “you,” so it is difficult to convey precisely when Paulos referred to an individual’s body (as in sex) versus the collective “Body” (as in the Body of Christ). I attempted to convey a sense that each individual is accountable, and individuals impact the community.

<sup>31</sup> c.f. Genesis 2:24.

<sup>32</sup> In the ancient world, only husbands had the legal authority to end a marriage. Wives could not divorce their husbands.

<sup>33</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 25:4.

<sup>34</sup> Paulos’ topic in this third essay was how Christians can confront a pagan culture with integrity, so Paulos’ discourse into whether or not a preacher should/can be paid seems like a detour to some. However, when we read Paulos as using himself as an illustration, an example of charity before liberty through limiting his personal freedom in order to serve the greater good, we can better understand how 9:1-18 fits into the overall essay.

<sup>35</sup> c.f. Genesis 25:29-34.

<sup>36</sup> *Imago dei* is a Latin term theologians use that means image of God. Theologians use *imago dei* to refer to the truth that all humankind are created bearing God’s image within them (c.f. Genesis 1:27).

<sup>37</sup> c.f. Exodus 13-17.

<sup>38</sup> c.f. Exodus 32:6.

<sup>39</sup> c.f. Psalm 24:1.

<sup>40</sup> The Greek word is *aresko*, which literally means “to please” yet with the connotation of “to serve.” Translators usually use “please” in English translations yet in doing so seem to suggest Paulos’ endorsement of being co-dependent and enabling. I have chosen to incorporate *aresko*’s sense of “serve” seeking to avoid the connotation of being co-dependent.

<sup>41</sup> The word “glory” in Hebrew and Greek conveys light, weight, and reflection, which I seek to convey in the poem.

<sup>42</sup> *Midrash* means interpretation or commentary, and Jewish rabbis collected their cumulative wisdom in series of books called *Talmud*. Paulos presented his own interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 in this section, thus offering his own *Midrash*. He argues for an essential equality between men and women based on his reading of Genesis, though he also offers some pragmatic accommodations because the Greek culture in which the Corinthians worship did not yet affirm equality between the genders.

<sup>43</sup> The Greek word used is *kephale*, which translates as “head,” but which can have three meanings: cranium, authority (Jane is head of the bank), or origin (the head waters of the Rio Grande). Translations that use “authority” obscure Paulos’ meaning, as he was merely reviewing basic facts from Genesis 1 and 2 at this point as he developed his argument.

<sup>44</sup> c.f. John 15:15.

<sup>45</sup> Ken Bailey, *ibid*. I am indebted throughout this section to Bailey’s chapter, pp. 295-313.

<sup>46</sup> c.f. Genesis 1:27.

<sup>47</sup> c.f. Genesis 2:20b-22.

<sup>48</sup> The Hebrew word is *ezer* which means “help” or “save.” *Ezer* is used in the name Lazarus, for instance, and means “one who is helped” or “one who is saved.”

<sup>49</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 31:31-34.

<sup>50</sup> When speaking the words of institution during holy communion, clergy tend to include what follows this quotation mark as if Jesus continues to speak. However, verse 11:26 was actually Paulos’ commentary on the words of institution, which is why I begin a new paragraph at 11:26.

<sup>51</sup> The hyphen in “re-mem-bering” is intentional and seeks to convey that the act of remembering can be more than mental nostalgia: “Oh remember that time we were at the beach and you splashed Henry?” Re-mem-bering can convey that the act of looking back brings to life, creates anew, a cherished life or love: “Remember the way Grandma’s perfume would get on you when she hugged you? I can still smell Grandma sometimes when I think about it.” In this illustration, Grandma is not actually present, of course, and yet her presence is Real in a blessed and mysterious way that is a gift of God.

<sup>52</sup> These verses (11:29-32) perennially give translators and commentators difficulty. Interpretation of them varies widely, for, quite frankly, they are not clearly understood. Certainly, there is no common agreement regarding their meaning. Because of this, I have chosen to begin these sentences with “perhaps” and end them with a question mark in order to convey a sense of “hold your understanding of these things lightly, please, for none of us may understand them well.”

<sup>53</sup> This was Paulos’ referent when he wrote of “clanging gong,” etc. in many English translations.

<sup>54</sup> Paulos’ reference connects with Jesus’ words in Matthew 21:21, “faith that can move mountains.” In Matthew’s context, the phrase connects to the Temple Mount, in which shadow Jesus was teaching his disciples. In the Matthean context, Jesus’ words refer to faith’s ability to replace the purpose of the Temple—to provide the forgiveness of sin. Thus, in Matthew, Jesus’ words form the basis of salvation by faith alone. The Matthean context would most likely have been lost on Corinthian believers, whose own city was encircled by mountains. Therefore, I have offered a more generic interpretation of “faith that can move mountains” and separated it from its Jerusalem context in the Gospels.

<sup>55</sup> The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *philos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love”), and *storge* which is empathy or a close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>56</sup> c.f. John 14:6.

<sup>57</sup> The Greek of 14:1 twice uses the word *de*, which translates as “now,” giving this verse a sense of urgency. Surprisingly, both the NRSV and NIV omit “now” from their translations. I include “now” because I believe it helps us understand Paulos’ transition from “faith, hope and love” back to the lesser spiritual gifts. It is as if Paulos was saying, “I have told you that the best place to

focus your attention is on faith, hope and love, but what about tongues, prophecy and knowledge? Well, *for now*, given the consummation of all things has not yet happened, prophecy (truth-telling in the Hebrew Bible and in the Apostolic Church) is better than tongues, etc.”

<sup>58</sup> c.f. Isaiah 28:11-12.

<sup>59</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:22-24 can be confusing as these verses seem to contradict each other. These verses are an example of Paulos’ usage of “ring” or “chiastic” structure in his rhetoric, which reveals the following flow,

- A – tongues for unbelievers
- B – prophecy not for unbelievers
- A – tongues not for unbelievers
- B – prophecy for unbelievers

Rather than being contradictory, Paulos’ argument is quite linguistically sophisticated.

<sup>60</sup> The Greek word used is *laleo*, which in the New Testament is translated as “speak.” *Laleo* has been interpreted to argue Paulos is forbidding women to speak in worship. However, in 11:2-16 generally, and in 11:5 specifically, Paulos allows women to speak in worship and only offers the best practices for such an occasion. Furthermore, in classical Greek, *laleo* is defined as “chatter,” which seems to solve the apparent contradiction. Paulos was prohibiting idle chatter, which in the ancient church was a problem among the female worshipers due to the unique architecture and social structure for seating attendees. In today’s Church, Paulos might address these words to toddlers with their parents, teenagers in the balcony, and bored husbands pretending to listen attentively.

<sup>61</sup> The Greek word used is *agnoeítai*, from which we get the English word “agnostic.”

<sup>62</sup> Greek has three voices: active—I act, passive—I am acted upon, and middle—I and thee act together. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 Paulos moves back and forth between active and middle voice, which I have tried to convey in the paraphrase.

<sup>63</sup> c.f. Heidelberg Catechism Question 1.

<sup>64</sup> The Greek word used is *horao*, which has the connotation both of “see” and “perceive.” I have attempted to convey both connotations in the paraphrase. It’s not just that Peter saw Jesus alive after he had seen him dead but that his seeing was accompanied by a deepening of meaning and broadened understanding of the significance of what was happening, to which Peter was a witness.

<sup>65</sup> Paulos was again trying to convey the “middle voice” by not taking credit for his work—“I and Abba together.” c.f. note 62.

<sup>66</sup> The Sadducees, who were the authorities over the Jerusalem Temple, taught there was no resurrection. The Pharisees, among several sects, taught a general resurrection in which all Jews would return to life simultaneously; akin to much Christian teaching that seeks to describe “the End Times” and an alleged “Rapture.”

<sup>67</sup> This paragraph includes much extra-biblical exposition and leans into “interpretive paraphrase” rather than “translation” of

the text. While the amount of exposition makes me nervous, for I want to stay true to the biblical text, I believe it provides helpful and even necessary context for understanding the concerns which Paulos seeks to address.

<sup>68</sup> c.f. Psalm 8:6.

<sup>69</sup> Paulos seems to have allowed his rhetoric to get too far ahead of his theological argument when he quotes the Psalm, so this paragraph is a corrective or frame to explain “all things” doesn’t mean Jesus will set his feet on God the Father. If Paulos had written today, this paragraph may have been a footnote. It certainly is not intrinsic to his argumentation in this portion of the essay.

<sup>70</sup> These phrases, “fill...fulfill...be the fullness...,” are my attempt to capture the essence of what is properly translated as “all in all.” The author humbly acknowledges the difficulty of capturing the significance of Paulos’ original phrase and respectfully welcomes readers’ suggestion for an edit.

<sup>71</sup> It is in 15:29 that Paulos used the phrase “why are people baptized for the dead?” Translators have historically found this phrase difficult. Some religious traditions point to this phrase to justify a theology and practice of baptism for deceased relatives. Many translators respectfully suggest this single verse is insufficient evidence upon which to base such a seminal theological insight and practice. Instead, most scholarly translators admit the difficulty and suggest Paulos *might* be alluding to believers’ spiritual death outside of a relationship with Jesus. In such cases of unclear evidentiary support, any formulation of doctrines should be held lightly and with proper caution.

I must acknowledge much of this exposition is post-Pauline and incorporates terminology from the Presbyterian Book of Order, especially The Directory for Worship, and Book of Confessions, with reference to The Heidelberg Catechism.

<sup>72</sup> c.f. Isaiah 22:13 and, in the words of the second stanza, comedian Dan Ackroyd, who stopped cracking this joke after his good friend and comedic partner, John Belushi, tragically died of a drug overdose—may he rest in peace.

<sup>73</sup> Immersed in Western culture that has been heavily influenced by ancient Greek thought, there is much muddled thinking and vague use of theological terminology regarding Christian belief about life eternal. To summarize, there is no proper Christian doctrine for the “immortality of the soul,” which is the Greek belief of a pool of souls from which the gods choose to insert into the newborn. The Christian doctrine is eternal life. Eternal life is not assumed but rather given by God as a gift, which I attempt to highlight in the paraphrase here and in the paragraphs that follow.

<sup>74</sup> c.f. Genesis 3:19 and The Book of Common Worship.

<sup>75</sup> c.f. Genesis 3:19 and The Book of Common Worship.

<sup>76</sup> “Transphysical” is a term coined by scholar and Bishop N.T. Wright to describe Jesus’ resurrected body, which was both physical and yet somehow more, c.f. *Jesus and the Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God (Vol. 3)*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN), 2003.

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<sup>76</sup> c.f. Emily Dickinson, *Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant*. Poetry is associated with telling something slant, as metaphor that both connects with the concrete and then amplifies and moves beyond it. I chose the word slant because too often we seem to want to understand resurrection in mechanistic terms, and, indeed, this may have been the Corinthians' desire as well. Further, as Dickinson's poem suggests, the truth is too brilliant for us to look at directly. Both in this chapter and other Pauline and Gospel passages, resurrection is best, perhaps only, understood slant.

<sup>77</sup> The Greek word is *mysterion* and usually translated as "mystery." However, *mysterion* can also mean "initiation." Greek culture's so-called "mystery religions" of secretive religious societies had elaborate initiation rituals for adherents. Paulos seems to use *mysterion* intentionally as an allusion to these secretive religious

societies, an allusion the Corinthian Christians would understand, as if he was saying, "This is how God's initiation into resurrected existence works."

<sup>78</sup> c.f. Isaiah 25:8.

<sup>79</sup> c.f. Hosea 13:14.

<sup>80</sup> The Greek word used is *bedraios* which gets translated as "stand firm" in the NIV. This is an appropriate translation in that our culture celebrates "standing for justice," and "stand up to the bully." However, *bedraios* actually means "sit," which in the ancient world was a form of protest and declaration of one's authority or autonomy. While I have no critique of the NIV, I wanted to explore what this verse might sound like using a different, idiomatic referent, so I chose a sit-in and subsequent reference to a well-known civil rights song.

# PRAYING

## 2 CORINTHIANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING 2 CORINTHIANS

Imagine a time before electronic church communications became the norm. An eight-year-old boy rushes to the pulpit following the benediction, grabs the pastor's sermon text, and throws it up in the air as he runs away. Now imagine an embarrassed parent running to the pulpit to undo the damage, snapping up the papers in no particular order before setting them back on the pulpit. The custodian, as is customary, grabs the sermon from the pulpit while tidying up and places the disordered pages on the church administrator's desk. On Monday morning, the administrator copies and mails this disorderly sermon to homebound congregants.

This is how 2 Corinthians reads.

Scholars are divided about the ancient manuscript(s) of 2 Corinthians. There are clues within the text itself that indicate Paul sent multiple letters to the Corinthians—but how many? 2 Corinthians itself may include anywhere from two to five “letter fragments” that seem cobbled together to create the sum of the parts we read today.

If one reads 2 Corinthians in one sitting, it becomes clear that Paulo wrote multiple letters. He visited the Corinthians twice and was planning a third visit. He felt the need to defend his authority because the Corinthians had accused him of ineptitude. They argued that his trials and persecution made him “weak.” Ultimately, Paulo and the Corinthians reconciled and worked together on a significant giving project for the saints in Jerusalem.

If one reads 2 Corinthians in one sitting, one may get confused. The letter bounces back and forth among multiple topics with a completely random, fragmentary insertion in chapter 6 (specifically 6:11–7:1). This inconsistency makes 2 Corinthians read like a series of interesting vignettes but not as a coherent narrative.

*Praying 2 Corinthians* seeks to create a coherent narrative.

Many pastors, confronted with the epistle's randomness, treat it accordingly. Most preachers have cherry-picked 4:7 (“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us”) for a sermon on perseverance, or 8:12 (“For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have”) for a stewardship sermon. However, cherry-picking scriptural texts does not convey the sense of the whole.

*Praying 2 Corinthians*, seeks to convey the sense of the whole.

For each epistle in this series, I try to do something unique for that epistle that might help readers plumb the depths of Paulo's thought. Sometimes these experiments are tame, as when I structured *Praying 1 Corinthians* according to the five essays that Paulo crafted for that epistle. Sometimes these experiments are more radical—as in the current work. In *Praying 2 Corinthians* I imagine how the epistle would read if that eight-year-old boy had not thrown Paulo's letter into the air. Specifically, I have rearranged the blocks of text according to thematic unity and literary coherence.

My intent is to allow the epistle to read as if written by someone with the intellectual heft we know Paulo had. Instead of incoherence, the text below reads like two, sustained conversations. The first section moves back and forth between the Corinthians' accusations and Paulo's defense of his ministry, while in the second section Paulo invites the Corinthians to reconcile and participate once again in shared ministry. Then, almost like a postscript, I have placed at the end the fragment that seems inconsistent with the rest of the epistle. Here is the order of verses you will read below, categorized by sections:

**Accusation and Defense**—1:1–6:10, 10:1–13:10

**Reconciliation and Invitation**—7:2–9:15, 13:11–14

**Addendum**—6:11–7:1

Does this change the way you hear the Word? Does it open you to the Spirit's illuminating work, to offer you new insights, challenge your assumptions, or call you to action? I pray it does all this and more, for even rearranged, it is still God's Word.

In addition to the radical restructuring of the chapters you will encounter below, I have continued with my practice of including poetry and prayer as interpretation and engagement with the Scripture text. In *Praying 2 Corinthians* I have returned to free verse poetry, which is my most comfortable form. I pray God's Spirit blesses your reading of God's Word.

Brad Munroe

April 2021

## Accusation and Defense

### 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Paulo, a sent one<sup>1</sup> of Jesus the Anointed through the grit, determination, and choosing of Abba, and Timothy our brother,

To the gathering<sup>2</sup> of the saints in Corinth made whole and complete by the same grit, determination, and choosing of Abba, and all who are set apart<sup>3</sup> throughout the region to the north and south of the great city:<sup>4</sup>

Gift and generosity to you all, *shalom*<sup>5</sup> within and without, communion with Abba and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>6</sup>

Joy upwelling, we sing to Abba, Father of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. Abba is the father of sacred urging, that compulsion deep within, to spill our passion<sup>7</sup> for the sake of another's well-being. This feeling doesn't originate with us but comes first from Abba—Abba gives, and we pay it forward.

Called to comfort<sup>8</sup> in troubled times—we pay it forward. Called to comfort in Jesus, even amidst overwhelming suffering for Jesus' sake—we pay it forward. Called to comfort when squeezed<sup>9</sup> as if in the clutches of a python, we invite you to receive Abba's encouragement and wholeness. Whenever we are called to comfort, you all, too, share in that calling, even though you, like those who send others to war, remain behind<sup>10</sup> and wait to hear a report of good news. Our hope, Timothy and I, is that just as you all are our companions in passion and pathos, so also will you all be our companions in being called to Abba's comfort, which is abundant, overwhelming, and immersive—a true gift.

I understand if you may have doubts about us; after all, how can we truly be sent ones if we suffer all the time? Where is Abba's blessing? Respectfully, you are asking the wrong questions. The presence of pain does not presume the absence of Abba—just the opposite! Yes, we have experienced trouble—indeed, nobody knows the trouble we've seen, nobody knows but Abba. It was intense! All that happened was far beyond our *dumanis*<sup>11</sup> to deal with, leading us almost to despair, with a death sentence hanging over our heads.

So, is this evidence that we are not truly sent ones? Never! Indeed, we were compelled to lay prostrate at Abba's throne, required to trust that Abba really is the One who brings life to the dead, as I wrote to you in my previous letter.<sup>12</sup> When death stalked us like prey, Abba drew us to

his breast, encircling us with protective arms. Though we were prey, we prayed to Abba and our hope, to which we cling day and night, became a beacon of light. And we are confident that many will give thanks for what Abba has done, many will be led to trust more deeply in Abba, many will join us with joy uplifting in all our hearts, hands, and voices to Abba that “the prey” became “the prayed for.” So, no, our “difficulties” are not evidence of Abba's ditching us—just the opposite!

*Sent*

*under Another's authority*

*commissioned to serve:*

*obedience the path to*

*glory's wreath*

God, it's me. I get it. I see the Corinthians' prejudice in today's Christian Church—the health-and-wealth Gospel is a plague upon our good, Presbyterian theology! I see it also in me. Not, perhaps, in my formal “theology,” but when I pray for a friend who does not get better or when I wonder where you are, what you're doing, why you aren't changing my circumstances in ways I want. I am the Corinthians. Abba, teach me to be like Paulo—able to endure suffering and experience your presence in the midst of it, willing to entrust my whole self—body and soul—and those whom I love—yes, all of them!—to your never-failing care. Teach me the grace of patience, the gift of perseverance, and the glory of an eternal perspective.

### 2 Corinthians 1:12-24

Timothy and I have heard your complaints. We understand you feel hurt. Yet we know our conscience is clear, for it bears witness—yes, it gives testimony in the Court presided over by the Divine Spirit—that we have acted toward you with honor and honest hearts before Imma. Our purity shines clear in the light of the sun.<sup>13</sup> Our integrity is built upon the firm foundation of Imma's gift<sup>14</sup> to us rather than the twigs and pebbles of our own wisdom. We write to you all out of what we have learned from Imma—personal knowledge, experiential understanding,<sup>15</sup> depth of insight and breadth of perspective—in the hope that y'all, too, will immerse ever more deeply into the God-

rhythms that we embrace and experience the God-life in all its fullness. Our hope, Timothy and I, is that y'all will one day boast that you know us just as we already boast that we know you and will one day boast of this before Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. So shall we boast on that Day when we greet him face-to-face.

I am confident your complaints against me have no merit. You expected me to return to Corinth,<sup>16</sup> and I wanted to do so on my way to the Macedonian region in northern Greece! Then I could have seen you twice, both coming and going. My hope and intent was for you to gather up a monetary gift<sup>17</sup> and send me to Judea, to the saints in Jerusalem. Please don't think for an instant that I made plans just to change them, nor that I was impulsive in choosing where to go. I do not speak out of both sides of my mouth, saying both "Yes" and "No!"

Because Imma is faithful, my message to you all is always "Yes," and not just mine but Silas' and Timothy's also. Yes to Imma's promises made in Jesus the Anointed. Yes to Imma making us all able to stand firm in Jesus. Yes to the claim Jesus put upon us, that we are called Imma's heirs, heirs to the kin-dom and family of Jesus. Yes to Jesus placing his Divine Spirit upon us, as a promise of hope and foreshadowing of that Day when we will dance to God-rhythms in the fullness of Imma's joy.

So, no, I wasn't fickle, nor did I intend to cause you hurt, much less betray your trust. As Imma is my witness—and upon this truth I will entrust my very life—it was for your sake, your well-being that I chose not to return to Corinth.<sup>18</sup> Not that I am your Master but together we share in Imma's work and experience Imma's joy, as together we stand strong through trust in Jesus the Anointed.

*Trust, tipped over  
like your grandmother's glass vase,  
lay broken.  
How many times must I say, "Yes"  
until you will believe me again  
and the vase can hold the flowers  
I bring as apology?*

God, it's me. I have been falsely accused before. I have had good intentions distorted by malice or misunderstanding. I have made promises I was forced—by circumstances beyond my control—to break. My heart goes out to Paulo, just trying to be helpful,

a faithful shepherd, only to have angry accusations hurled in his face! Yet, I also have been disappointed by those in whom I put my trust. I also have felt lied to, even betrayed. I also know the heart pains when ministry I want to continue goes away, ministry that I was not yet ready to release. My heart goes out to the Corinthians; perhaps they're an unruly bunch but then, who isn't?

## 2 Corinthians 2:1-8

Rather than be fickle about whether to visit you all or not, I made a choice: I chose to write to you instead of visiting again because our previous visit had been so painful—both to me and to you all.<sup>19</sup> If I bring y'all sorrow, how can you bring me joy? And y'all are a wellspring of joy to me, so I decided to write you all, as I discerned this was the path of wisdom. By writing, I hoped to craft my message in ways that would not cause you further sorrow. In my writing, I entrusted y'all with my very heart: tender and broken, intent on revealing to all of you the depth of my love for you all.

Those who cause a ruckus within the gathering—and, even more, who create chaos<sup>20</sup>—do me no harm but harm you all; it is a sin against the Body, not to overstate the situation too much. That you all, as the Body of Jesus in this world, chose to draw a line and define appropriate behavior for one of your own is blessed and a blessing. It is now appropriate—even a sacred calling—to forgive the man and call him to comfort, for he need not be pummeled by wave upon wave of sorrow. I plead and pray that all y'all surround him with your love and hold him to your breasts in sincere embrace.

*"A few bad apples spoil the bunch."  
Even one can spew poison,  
which spreads, infecting others.  
Blessed is the church that says: "Enough!"  
And twice blessed is the church that forgives.*

God, it's me. I rush too quickly to forgive, sometimes. Sometimes my mercy is cheap. Sometimes I mouth the words, "I forgive you," when another has neither requested nor desires my frivolous mercy. Sometimes my forgiveness, so prodigiously dispensed, is the problem. Abba, teach me the gift of boundaries lovingly

set, of being “soft on people, hard on behaviors.” Teach me the gift of saying to another, “I love you for who you are, and too much to let you continue to do what you do.” Abba, show me how to love those whom Jesus loves enough that I refuse to allow them to destroy their own Body, whose prayers ascend for them and with whom they worship and serve.

## 2 Corinthians 2:9-17

I wrote instead of visiting you all to challenge you to obedience: Are you willing and able to stand at all times, for every test, based on the Word I teach? Now here is your current test: forgiving. Whoever you forgive, I forgive them, too. And all that I have forgiven in you all—presuming there was anything to forgive—I forgave as if Jesus was looking over my shoulder, coaxing me forward. My motive was your blessing, my intention your spiritual protection so that the Accuser will not outfox us! We know the Accuser too well—the deception and duplicity—and choose not to play his fool.

Now when we went to Troas, on the coast in northwest Turkey, we did so to tell the Good News about Imma’s Anointed and found she had already opened some doors for me. While I was tickled to tell the Good News about Jesus, my mind was restless, worried about Titus, whom I expected to find in Troas. Eventually I said goodbye to the Troasians and traveled to Macedonia.

I give Imma thanks, though, for whether in Troas or Macedonia (or, indeed, in Corinth, too), wherever she leads me I am like the captive whom the Romans soldiers have taken in battle, the ones they parade around to gloat over in their victory. That’s me! Only Imma has conquered my heart, and my captivity is pure joy. Imma uses us to transform the stench of this world into a fragrance that scents of her *shalom*, a fragrance that brings Imma joy, a fragrance that is breathed in by we who are, being made whole and complete, a fragrance that wafts spiritual zest deep into our souls. This same aroma is received not as a fragrance but as an odor by those who continue to deny themselves the gift of Imma’s love and fight against their own wholeness. In rejecting Imma’s fragrance they choose their own destruction. Oh, this breaks my heart, and I feel unequal to the work set before me! How can I bear knowing that my telling of the Good News didn’t turn another’s heart toward the God-life? I take solace, though, knowing I do not speak of the God-life for my own sake,

as so many hucksters speak it. Never! I speak neither for profit nor any other form of personal gain, but as one whose purity shines clear in the light of the sun.

*The sense of smell is a curious thing.*

*Stench or fragrance?*

*Odor or aroma?*

*Living toward destruction or dying into life?*

God, it’s me. Oh, how I identify with Paulo! I know the sense of inadequacy, the feelings that my best just isn’t good enough. When I was young, Imma, you know how much I imagined my ministry would be an unblemished march toward success and accolades—Huzzah! Huzzah! As I have aged, I have learned that such thoughts were my ego talking. Over the years, you have offered me the gift of failing. Failures little and large are my mentors, and always, always and forever, you have shown me your grace is enough for me. You have taught me—and continue to teach me—that the God-life is not about me but about you, and that in giving myself wholly, completely, and utterly to you I discover my truest self—wholly, completely, and utterly. So please, Imma, can we continue this blemished march?

## 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Not that we are beginning to stand upon our laurels! We seek neither applause nor accolades—you all are the only applause we need. Knowing you all is like reading a love letter written upon our hearts by Jesus the Anointed, penned not in ink but by Abba’s Divine Spirit. This letter is the fruit of our labors for the sake of Jesus.

The Anointed One persuades our hearts to stand together with him.<sup>21</sup> We are “sufficient unto ourselves” only in our self-delusion. We are not worthy to stand, but Abba makes us able to stand.<sup>22</sup> Abba makes us worthy—worthy as servants of the sacred promises he gives, worthy as servants of the new relationship he offers, worthy as servants of the high and holy calling to guide others by the Divine Spirit toward the God-life. The God-life is never found in mere words because it is a Spirit-led dance. The God-life, once written in letters upon stone, now resides in our hearts—written by the Divine Spirit who brings life.

*The stone tablet is not a piece of rock lost to history  
upon which God inscribed commands;  
it is the human heart  
refusing to dance to God-rhythms.  
Abba, may I never turn down the Spirit  
when asked to dance  
even if I do not (yet) hear the music.*

God, it's me. I identify with Paulo: wanting to commend myself—I work so hard!!!—yet knowing my only confidence comes from you. I say I trust you, yet I relish my competence. I say I trust you, yet I defend my every action. I say I trust you, yet I am unwilling to remain silent when confronted by another—my defensiveness accusing my trust, exposing it as a lie. Abba, forgive me my sins! Abba, free me from the bondage of my false self! Abba, forge within me a real trust—true confidence—that you stand with me both when I succeed and when I fail. May you be—in Word and in Spirit—my true confidence and only assurance.

## 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

All service has a kind of glory.<sup>23</sup> The service written upon stone tablets brought death, yet had a glory—reflecting Imma's light upon Moses' face, even though it lasted only a short while.<sup>24</sup> How much more will the service danced to Spirit-rhythms have a glory—reflecting the blazing light of Jesus the Anointed to all who are encountered by him? If the service that led to disapproval shined Imma's light to those able to gaze upon Moses, how much more will the light of the Spirit's service radiate like the sun to the four corners of the earth? The flashlight is no match for the floodlight, and the moon is a pale comparison to the sun! The glory of that which fades is feeble compared to the glory of the One who shines forever!

We are confident—even bold—not because of our own, limited achievements but because of the grandeur of the Divine Spirit's accomplishments. We have assurance—even hope—not because we wear the kind of veil worn by Moses, who covered his face so the Israelites wouldn't see Imma's reflection dimming, but because we no longer wear any veil at all, for the Divine Spirit has taken it from us. The Spirit comes when Jesus the Anointed is received. The Spirit takes our dulled sensibilities and sharpens our focus and ignites our fervor. The Spirit frees the human heart for joyous service. The Spirit makes us able to reflect

Imma's light to all whom we meet. The Spirit transforms us into the image and reflection of Jesus, like being poured into his mold. As the reflection of Jesus, we live with our minds conforming to his wisdom, with our hearts being broken by those things that evoke his compassion, and with our spirits uniting as one with Imma herself. This is the work of the Divine Spirit.

*Old Glory is not a flag,  
nor even a faith,  
but a movement  
of Imma's Divine Spirit  
teaching us the rhythms of justice and joy.*

God, it's me. As one who likes to stand upon the heights of my own achievements, I take offense at Paulo's insinuation that I might travel even farther were I to allow the Spirit to lead, to guide, and to infuse my work with holy intention. As one who has climbed the mountain of professional success, I feel insulted by Paulo's suggestion that I might climb ever higher were the Spirit's passion and wisdom and insight and chutzpah to fill my reservoirs to overflowing. Imma, I stand a full 2 ¾" taller than I should because of all my achievements! How dare Paulo suggest I would be better off if I could truly fly!

## 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Because we are bathed in Abba's mercy we serve and do not lose heart. We renounce shadow to embrace light. We renounce deceit to embrace candor. We renounce all perversion and parody that distort the truth to embrace Abba's Word plainly spoken. Our words bear witness to how our sharing of the Good News of Jesus is open and transparent.

Our sharing of the Good News is never hidden. Our sharing of the Good News is nothing like the so-called "Mystery Religions," who purposely keep secret their words and their worship.<sup>25</sup> If our message is "veiled" to some, that's only because they refuse to see Abba's works of justice and joy, of compassion and care. If their ears are plugged, that's only because they refuse to hear a message of Abba's love for them. The god of this age has made them blind and deaf, but we shall not be mute! With their eyes shut tight, they cannot see the light of Jesus the Anointed, who bears Abba's image to the world—Abba's

nature and character being expressed in Jesus' person and actions. With fingers in their ears, they refuse to hear our Good News message that Jesus is sovereign above Caesar! Yet we will not be silent. We choose to speak, regardless of the cost, and our message is one of Abba's New Creation:

Let there be light!<sup>26</sup>  
 Let the light shine!  
 Shine in our hearts!  
 Shine through the darkness!  
 May all who see be transformed!  
 May all who see look upon Jesus, face-to-face!

*In a culture where truth is obscured,  
 where nothing is what it seems,  
 and double-speak is our native tongue:  
 Plain talk is a balm for my soul.  
 Light in a world of shadows.*

God, it's me. Plain talk seems like cold water in the desert—thirst quenched and spirit restored. I long for plain talk, for those who say what they mean (with kindness) and mean what they say (without agenda). I love such folks and admire them greatly! So I am chagrined when I find myself falling into "Christian speak." I can wax eloquent on the distinctions between "justification" and "sanctification," but can I also do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you? I can spin yarns that bring others to heights of passion or depths of tears, but can I also simply love you and love my neighbor as I love myself? Abba, teach me the gift of saying, "Yes" and "No," with kindness and without agenda.

## 2 Corinthians 4:7-18<sup>27</sup>

Our plain talk points beyond human speech to divine eloquence, an eloquence that leaks out as if from cracks in pottery made for everyday living. This is the eloquence of Imma herself, who takes our ordinary, everyday lives and makes of them something beautiful, something wondrous. We look neither beautiful nor wondrous, I know, but be assured Imma's *dunamis*<sup>28</sup> is at work through us; indeed, we know the power is from Imma

precisely because we are so not beautiful and so not wondrous!

Everywhere we go we are confronted with troubles yet nothing Imma can't get us out of. We are bewildered by the scope of our troubles, yet with hope. We're personally attacked, yet Imma remains at our side. We're beaten and left for dead, yet here we are, alive and kicking. What seem like Jesus' own wounds and scars upon our bodies are merely a sign that we walk in his path of cruciform living. We are glad to walk this path in order that Jesus' resurrection life may be whispered in your ears. Hearing Jesus whisper to you all, we know that his Word will permeate your entire being—from head to heart and from gut to gizzard, down to the marrow of your soul.

It's like this: We who are alive are always dying; from the day of our first breath to our last gasp, death is our destiny. Yet we who are found in Jesus the Anointed are dying unto life, his Cross becoming our cross that his Resurrection may become our life anew and life eternal. It's like the Psalmist wrote,<sup>29</sup>

I trust!  
 I confess!

Like the Psalmist, we trust and we confess, which is why we speak the plain words of the Good News about Jesus the Anointed. We speak these plain words because we have personal experience and deep insight into the ways of Imma and know that Imma raised Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, from death to life. In the same way, Imma will raise me and raise all y'all. Imma will raise us together and present us as a gift to Jesus—all his beloved whom he shall love for all eternity! So this is why we serve and why we speak the Good News plainly: so that y'all may be blessed, so that all y'all may be given Imma's gifts, so that more and more and more people may have cause to be grateful. We speak so that a burst of thanksgiving may cause us to reflect Imma's goodness because of who you are.

So, yeah, service can be hard. It's not fun to experience troubles, nor be bewildered, nor be attacked, nor be beaten, but we do not lose heart! Sure, we may look sickly and straggly on the outside, but on the inside we are ready to roll! Sure, we may encounter some shadows and struggles, but we feel the weight of Imma's gravity underneath our feet and know she will make us able to stand. From this firm foundation of Imma's gift of *agape*<sup>30</sup> and *shalom*, we look not at our outward troubles but upon

her inward truth, not at what will one day “go the way of all things” but upon that which is eternal. What is seen will one day disappear but the eternal, which is unseen, will endure. We choose that which endures.

*The Buddha was correct: Life is difficult.  
Christians, too, are correct: crosses are deadly.  
Yet “daily” we are to take them up.  
Daily?  
I’d settle for  
eventually.*

God, it’s me. It is easy to lose heart in a world of COVID and conflict around every corner. It is easy to lose heart in a church that has lost its sense of purpose. It is easy to lose heart when health insurance is unaffordable and ongoing employment is left in doubt. It is easy to lose heart, which is just another way of saying, “It’s easy to be afraid.” Imma, I give you my fear. I give you my heart. I trust that you know my heart is a precious thing—please treat it with care.

## 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

We choose to seek that which endures. The choice is simple: a rough tent or a secure home, a rickety structure of sticks and mud or the dwelling place of Abba above? We yearn to be clothed with heavenly garb, to live in a heavenly dwelling, to never again worry about being naked and on the streets. Roughing it in an earthly tent is a difficult and precarious way to live—the risk of being shamed around every corner, the peril of humiliation threatened in every breath.<sup>31</sup> While roughing it in an earthly tent, we await the moment when the doors to our heavenly dwelling, which Jesus himself has prepared for us,<sup>32</sup> will be opened forever—Death swallowed up by Life! And this isn’t just mere “God-talk” spewed by a preacher! Rather, it is the divine intention. It is the well-planned, intricately crafted, precision-designed purpose<sup>33</sup> of Abba. Don’t believe us? Well, we have the Divine Spirit alive and at work upon us and through us—a deposit of sorts, a down payment, a guarantee that our future is in Abba’s hands.

This is why we show such courage<sup>34</sup> in the face of troubles and attacks, when bewildered or beaten: our earthly tent is not our eternal home! We live by trusting into hope, which is to say we live as forward-looking people, with eternity the horizon we long to see. What we

see in our day-to-day living is not the deepest truth of the creation—how can it be? One day we will be away from this earthly tent and dwelling face-to-face in Abba’s home, a dinner guest of the Creator himself!

If ever we can be accused of being naked, we are nakedly ambitious<sup>35</sup> to dwell in Abba’s home and dine at Abba’s table. We strive in our service to be faithful, despite our troubles, because we know that one day we will stand before Jesus to give an account of our work. Jesus will appraise our faithfulness and give us our fair share of blessing. Abba’s gift of *agape* and *shalom* will cover all—true—but we want Abba and Jesus to be well-pleased by what we accomplish for their names’ sake while roughing it in our earthly tents.

*Camping is fun,  
glamping a bit more fun,  
and a five-star resort the pinnacle of decadence.  
Imagine now how much more a heavenly dwelling will be!*

God, it’s me. I admit that I too often get caught up in “earthly tent” concerns: my mortgage, my comfort, a long awaited (and, in my view, a well-deserved) vacation. These are the comforts of the middle-class West—neither known nor imagined by billions of my fellow humans on this planet. I confess, too, that I too easily claim privilege to these comforts that are withheld from the aforementioned billions. Abba, I am more than chagrined—I’m embarrassed! Give me just a little bit more of Paulo’s “look to the eternal horizon” perspective and a lot more of his passion to be fully prepared for that Day when Jesus and I have a face-to-face.

## 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

It’s all about pleasing Imma for us: trembling with awe and wonder, reverence tinged with fear, amazed that we have the privilege to tell others about her. Imma sees us as we are, without any silly masks to wear, no airs to put on, and we hope y’all see us the same way. We are who we are. We are not trying to impress you, yet hope y’all will be proud to say you know us. We hope that when our names are mentioned with scorn by those who only look at the outside, at the “earthly tent,” you’ll say, “Yeah but we know their heart.” And when some say, “But they’re crazy!” (for we know some folks say such things), you’ll say, “Crazy for

Jesus!” The love of Jesus the Anointed is like a pressure in our chest, as if Jesus himself is massaging our heart, squeezing every ounce of love in us to pump throughout our body,<sup>36</sup> energizing us for his mission of making all humankind whole and complete.

That mission is worth our reminding y’all: one man, Adam, died, and so all died. But the One, Jesus, who died is the One who makes us all live, just as he lives. We live not in self-centered ways but as emissaries and ambassadors of his great mission. We see the world through the lens of Jesus’ great mission. No worldly point of view is sufficient: accumulating power and control and wealth don’t breathe joy into one’s soul. The rat race diminishes the human race. Dog-eat-dog is no meal for Imma’s children. Truth be told, we once looked at Jesus through such a lens but not anymore!

Now we look at everyone through the lens of Jesus’ purpose on earth: to bring new creation. In Jesus, the old is vanishing step by step. In Jesus, the new is emerging breath by breath. This, all of this, the vanishing and the emerging, all of it is Imma’s gift, the work of Imma’s intention and purpose. Imma reconciled herself to us—to you, to me, and, indeed, to all the *cosmos*—through the work of Jesus the Anointed. Imma then commissioned us to the work of reconciliation: Reconciling is our job! Imma chose not to look at our faults, our brokenness, our least and our worst, but chose instead to look upon the work of Jesus: love emanating eternal light, love transforming human hearts, love reversing the rhythm of death itself. So, this is now our work: to tell the Story and to live the Story of Jesus’ restoring to Imma’s bosom all people and all things, even the creation itself.

So let’s not sell ourselves short! Imma has drafted us to be on her team, to tell her Story, to share the joyous news that there is hope for the here-and-now that extends into eternity. Therefore, let’s get our act together (I say this for the sake of Jesus and his purpose on earth): be Imma’s friend and get your heart and mind, your spirit and soul, right with her now. Remember this astonishing truth: Imma made Jesus to become sin for us—not just “carry it,” nor merely “carry it away,” but to “be” sin, to bear sin’s distorted heart within his own heaving chest. Why would Imma do such a thing? Simple: so that we might be in right relationship with her, and clearly and more fully reflect Imma’s image into the world.

*The chalice shattered as it hit the floor,  
lying in a hundred pieces, sharp edges threatening feet.  
A child knelt to touch the shards.  
One by one, the child’s fingers grasped each shard.  
“Imma will know what to do,” she thought.  
As the adults around her looked on, they thought,  
“Child, how sweet, how foolish you are!” They said,  
“Nothing so broken can be mended.”  
The child continued her work and continued,  
believing always, “Imma can make it whole.”*

God, it’s me. The work of reconciliation is arduous: soul searching, heart rending, emotionally exhausting work. I much prefer intellectualizing my grievances so that I can make myself the hero or the victim, whichever best suits my purpose or my pleasure. To become right with you, right with another, right with my own self is work that requires more than I can usually give. To speak the truth and have it spoken to me, to hear the truth and invite another to hear it spoken to them, to humble myself that I might become free—all these are acts of faith I fear to take. Yet I am seduced by your Spirit’s whispers to my soul, “Come, Child, and trust that Imma is the author of this moment. Come, Child, and hope there is a better way than perpetual enmity. Come, Child, and love the way Jesus loves.”

## 2 Corinthians 6:1-10

We work with Abba and urge you to embrace Abba’s gift of love, mercy, and right relationship—not as an empty blessing but through a life that dances to the God-rhythms in everything you are. As the truth-teller Isaiah wrote:

In the moment of crisis, I heard your cry;  
on the day of your need, I was your strength.<sup>37</sup>

Now is the moment when Abba hears you! Now is the moment when Abba offers you his strength! Now is the *kairos*<sup>38</sup> when Abba himself is inviting you to embrace the ministry of reconciling yourselves, others, and the creation through the God-rhythms of the God-life. And now we, too, invite you all to this work, for nothing we have done has kept you from it or keeps you from it. Now it is for all y’all to affirm and act upon.

Indeed, we have gone to extraordinary lengths to serve Abba in ways that will empower you all. We've endured physical pressures that squeezed our will to the breaking point. Chaos and storm disoriented our moral compass. Our emotional wellness was attacked every step of our journey; our spiritual wellness was challenged in every imaginable manner; our character was assassinated and intentions impugned. Yet in all this we remembered who we are and whose we are. Some thought we were dying, yet we live; others considered us worthy of death, yet still we move; and all who saw us considered us poor, pitiful, and painful to look upon. Yet we make others rich and joyful. Though we have little, we lack no good thing.

*Carried in a basket, a bullet grazing its edge,  
running from soldiers upon her grandmother's back,  
her earliest memory.*

*Carried upon her grandmother's back,  
assurance and love transformed  
atrocious into identity.*

*Now she carries herself confidently into the world  
with a depth  
I seek to become.*

God, it's me. I live such a privileged life. Born into the American middle class, education assumed, social support a given—the entire community protecting my path from my own silliness as a youth. Who am I to suggest others “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” when I have not endured devastation, nor had it inflicted upon me? Who am I to belittle the child whose belly is hungry and cannot focus at school or the youth whose family struggles to make ends meet and fears for her future? Abba, make me an instrument of your shalom, blessed to be a blessing, sharing my gifts that I might discover my soul.

## 2 Corinthians 10:1-18

I, Paulo, who am accused of being God-reliant in your presence but self-reliant in your absence, summon you to embrace with courage the truth of my words, for I speak with the gentle strength and strong logic of Jesus. I pray that I will not need to be so God-reliant when I am among you. Though we are accused of wielding power and

abusing it, such is not the truth, for though we walk among the world we belong to Jesus. Our authority is ministerial—how faithfully we serve—and declarative—how plainly we speak. With this authority we erase lines that never should have been drawn, undermine whisper campaigns hellbent on manipulation, and disrupt arrogance. With this authority we subvert unjust systems and take hearts and minds captive in order to free them to dance to God-rhythms. With this authority we will speak and demand what is right, just, and good until your living into the God-life is made whole and complete.

Don't judge merely by what you see on the surface. It may not appear as if we belong to Jesus given our hardships and strife, yet we belong just as much as anyone else who has been chosen, called, and embraced by Abba's love. You may be offended that we declare our authority as Jesus' “sent ones,”<sup>39</sup> yet our calling is to build up the Body, to edify and encourage, and so we shall—and we make no apology. I do not desire to frighten nor discourage you in my letters, as some find my message too direct. Others claim, “He writes with boldness, but in person is rather mild and meek.” Worry not that I will be mild and meek when I am next in your presence.

I am not trying to be more than what Abba has called me to be, nor to do more than what he has called me to do. I don't compare myself to other leaders, which would be silly and unwise, but measure myself according to the call Abba has placed upon my life. We hold our heads up high.<sup>40</sup> With heads held high, we speak the truth plainly to you. With heads held high, we rebuke, reproach, and reprimand as each is needed. With heads held high, we applaud, approve, and admire as each is justified. We do this because you are the flock whom Abba has entrusted to us—entrusted to tell y'all the Good News and teach all y'all how to live it, and not only you but those beyond your horizons in ever-widening circles. So we will not hang our heads in shame as we work among you but look to the heavens. As the truth-teller Jeremiah wrote,

Let the one who looks up, look to Abba!<sup>41</sup>

My own self-commendation means nothing. Abba's commendation means everything.

*Defending your ministry is folly.  
Your adversaries won't listen—entrenched in opposition.  
Your friends will hang on your every word—spellbound!  
Who are you trying to impress anyway?*

*Doing what you are called to do—  
nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.  
Doing it all to the best of your God-given gifts.  
Let the one who looks up, look to Abba!*

God, it's me. I have been in Paulo's shoes before—justifying my worth in response to input from 100 individuals, each with their own opinion of what I should (and should not) do and how I should (and should not) do it. The only thing upon which they agreed was that it should (or should not) be done immediately. "Keeping everyone happy" is impossible (as well as crazy-making). I choose the path I sense Paulo took—having one boss (and only one boss). I am speaking of you, of course, Abba. Funny thing though: your photo doesn't appear in the church directory, so how can you be my boss? Then again, whether pastor or parishioner, aren't you everyone's "boss"?

## 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

Call me foolish, perhaps, or even a fool. Yes, that's it—call me a fool! But I am a fool for Jesus, for my "foolishness" is having such a zeal for all y'all. My zeal is a sacred passion for your spiritual well-being. I made a covenant with Abba and with you, a sacred promise that I would present all of you to him as those whose purity is clear in the light of the sun, as those whose integrity embraces compassion and whose longing for truth is matched by a desire to seek it and follow wherever it leads.

I worry, however, that you have been and are being led astray, that like the Serpent in the Garden deceiving Eve, you have been and are being deceived by so-called "Superheroes of the Faith," those who call themselves "Avengers for Jesus." The Good News story they tell is not good at all, the spirits you receive from them are not Abba's Divine Spirit, and the "Jesus" they proclaim bears no resemblance to Jesus the Anointed, sovereign over Caesar, whose Story you received from us. Indeed, y'all seem to accept this "alternative Good News" too easily, for which I am dismayed.

You are correct in your accusation against me: I am no "Superhero of the Faith." I am neither polished nor charismatic as a public speaker; all I possess is wisdom from Abba and intimate knowledge of Abba's sacred Word, as even y'all must admit from having heard me teach. So, what is your objection to my teaching? Was I

wrong in teaching you without requiring payment? Would you have valued it more had I insisted upon payment from you? Are you offended that I asked the Macedonians to support me so that I might teach and preach among you without in any way being a burden to y'all? Call me a fool, but the Spirit of Jesus compels me to insist that I not be a burden to you all. It's not because I love y'all less but because I love all y'all so much, as Abba can attest!

I will keep doing what I am doing in order to frustrate the boasts of those "Superheroes" who pretend to be our equal. They boast and brag about their beautiful oratory and the many "wonders" they conjure, but their work does not conform to the Way of Jesus; they do not do justice, neither do they love mercy, and never do they walk humbly with Abba. Pretenders they all are, like the original Accuser who was an alleged purveyor of light but only created darkness. Surprise, surprise: These "Superheroes" follow in his path toward darkness. Their destiny is to receive justice.

*Care should be taken  
in what you read  
in what you hear  
in what you speak:  
See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.*

*Abba's Story is told  
by those who have endured injustice  
by those who have embraced grace  
by those who have spoken the truth in love:  
See Jesus, hear Jesus, proclaim Jesus.*

God, it's me. I hate being compared to those who are better than me. Those with 50,000 megawatt smiles. Those whose books sell trite clichés by the millions. Those who tell people exactly what they want to hear. I would much prefer to be compared with those who leave water in the desert.<sup>42</sup> Those who can walk with the dying and enhance their dignity. Those who bear burdens and dispense blessing, who both tell and embody Good News. Then, if and when I am found wanting, at least I will be left wanting what is good, what is just, and what is true.

## 2 Corinthians 11:16-31

Call me a fool, if you must, but if you do then tolerate a bit of my own foolish boasting. (Now I am not speaking as Imma would have me speak but am speaking according to the ways of the world. As it seems you want to hear the ways of the world, I'll comply!) I know you'll let me have the floor for some foolish boasting—foolish boasting is what you do because you are so, so “wise.” In fact, you are so “wise” y'all even accept your own exploitation and celebrate those who manipulate all y'all. Y'all seem to welcome abuse—the slap in the face is a cause for rejoicing. That I just couldn't bring myself to do that to y'all is no doubt a cause and reason to distrust me.

So, if I am going to boast and brag like a fool, let's get on with it: Is the “Superhero's” DNA descended from Abraham and Moses? Me too! Do they embrace Torah (at least in theory)? Me too! Do they follow the laws of the land of Israel? Me too! Are they servants of the Anointed? (I cannot believe I am speaking such foolishness.) Me too!

In fact, I have worked harder, longer, and smarter than these “Superheroes.” I have been exploited and abused, been beaten and bruised, and almost had to call Death my mistress. Five times the religious leaders of my own people whipped me 39 times, bringing me to the brink of the abyss. Three times they used rods—you know, the thick, brutal bats that show no mercy. Once they used stones—not mere pebbles but rocks their hands could not enclose. Three times I was shipwrecked, and one of those times I spent a night in the open sea! For more nights than I can count, I have not had a roof over my head. “Danger” is my middle name: danger from rushing rivers, danger from bandits, danger from those of my own nation, danger from those of other nations, danger in the city, danger at open sea, and now danger from those who bear false witness to the cause of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign over Caesar.

Don't want to call “Danger” my middle name? Then how about “Deprivation”? I have worked without sleep. I have worked without food. I have worked without water. I have suffered cold and been stripped naked. But do y'all want to know what is worse than all these deprivations? I have felt daily, hourly, and moment by moment, the burdens of all my children: sharing in your weakness and grieving your brokenness. This is my true and honest boasting: I hold my head high that I am allowed to show my weakness (as both Imma and Jesus will bear witness—may they be forever praised).

### *Foolish*

*to play the world's game  
by the world's rules  
where “winning” is losing  
and the race always goes to the  
privileged.*

### *Wise*

*to play a different game  
by rules forged in Creation's initial burst  
where “enough” is sufficient  
and we walk farther because we walk  
together.*

God, it's me. I admire Paulo's restraint, his resistance to boasting as the world would have him boast. Too often am I tempted to brag because I am attacked and feel defensive or because I am plagued by self-doubt and need to bolster my confidence. Too easily do I play the game of “If I can't be good at least I can look good” and “Fake it 'til you make it.” Imma, I respect Paulo's confidence, not in himself but in you, not in his self-sufficiency but that you make him worthy. Teach me such trust! Deepen my dependence upon you and upon the mercy you rain down upon us all, including me. Set me on the path toward knowing the joy that in my being weak, you are strong.

## 2 Corinthians 11:32–12:10

My troubles surround me at all times. When I was in Syria, the Roman governor ordered the local soldiers of Damascus to seek, find, and arrest me. Only the mercies of Abba's people, who lowered me down in a basket from a window in the city walls, kept me from being arrested.

Let me continue to boast, even though it will do me no good. Let me tell you about sacred dreams and divine visions, the unveiling of mysteries rooted in Abba's character and purpose. I know a guy....

This guy was swept away to the in-between, to that place that is almost-but-not-quite heaven.<sup>43</sup> I'm not sure if this was a dream, a mystical vision, or a bodily visit; only Abba knows for sure. But whatever it was, the guy was close enough to the heart of heaven, close enough to Abba's throne, that he heard the divine music of creation itself, the God-lyrics that order all things, which he is forbidden to utter. If I'm going to boast, I'll boast about this guy—who is

the real deal—rather than boast about myself, weak as I am. I have the right to boast and not be considered a fool because I speak the truth. But I am going to stop talking now because I want to be judged on my words and deeds rather than divine dreams, visions, and mystical encounters with Abba.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, in order to keep me humble, Abba allowed the Accuser to confront me with trial and tribulation: I call it the “thorn in my flesh.” I’m not a big fan of trial, so I prayed and prayed and kept praying, “Abba, take this thorn away!” And Abba said to me in my innermost spirit, in that place where conviction and assurance embrace, “My gift of loving you is enough. You will endure and will overcome this trial. It will point you toward the direction of hope and mold you in the shape of love. Through this trial, you will learn to trust Jesus in all things, through all things, and for all things.” For this reason, for the way Jesus is honored, for the way I experience Jesus showing up in my life when difficulties happen, I rejoice in weakness, delight in hardship, and am absolutely tickled by all manner of persecution: less of me is more of Abba.

*Strength can be the Devil’s toy:  
an invitation to toxic masculinity,  
or, at best, delusion of self-sufficiency,  
an invitation to believe, “I’ve got this.”*

*Weakness, too, can be the Devil’s playground:  
the prison for the abused,  
or, at best, mere lip service feigning humility,  
an invitation to play a part with no real truth.*

*Weakness, though, can become Abba’s gift:  
an invitation to embrace authenticity,  
and, at best, the truth that we are Abba’s Beloved,  
an invitation to embrace who we are—Abba’s gift.*

God, it’s me. Let’s see: I have a Master’s from Princeton, a doctorate, and 30+ years of ministry. And that doesn’t make me better than others? How is that fair? Abba, actually, I know that my “academic creds” are meaningless in your eyes, for you call me to honesty, to authenticity, to embrace my belovedness and then express it. You love me not because of my “creds” but because of your own: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Friend of both Saints and Sinners! When will

I learn that I don’t have to prove myself to you? When will I accept that you have already given yourself to me? May I become whole, embracing my weakness that opens me to your strength.

## 2 Corinthians 12:11-21

What a fool I have been, commending myself like that. It is y’all who should be commending me, for though I am nothing at all, I am every bit the equal of the alleged “Superheroes of the Faith.” I patiently did the authentic work of the Good News, persisted in loving beyond my own abilities, persevering in love to demonstrate all that the *dunamis* of Imma can accomplish.<sup>45</sup> You were deprived of nothing except the opportunity to provide financial support for my work—forgive me for that!

As I prepare to visit y’all for the third time, I will not now become a burden, will not now ask you to provide for me financially. Never! I do not want your money, but want instead your hearts, your compassion, and your communion in dancing the God-rhythms of the God-life. I desire only to be for you all like a parent: ready to give all that I have and all that I am that y’all may grow in faith, in hope, and in love. If I continue to love you more and more, will you love me even less?

I have not been, nor will I become, a burden to you. Wily fisherman that I am, I have used my love as bait<sup>46</sup> to lure you into my embrace. None of the brothers I sent to you failed to serve you all. Titus loved and served y’all. The other brother loved and served y’all. They both walked the Way of Jesus and were guided by Jesus’ Divine Spirit in all they did among all y’all. How crafty and cunning of me!

Please know that I am not trying to convince you to accept me; neither am I attempting to plead my case before you, as if y’all are the judge of whether I am the equal to the so-called “Superheroes.” Never! Rather, our speech is directed toward Imma; our words a prayer to Jesus. It is before the divine judgment we submit ourselves—our only hope being that our work causes y’all to grow more clearly into the image of Jesus, with your belovedness more plainly experienced, and Imma’s call upon your lives more clearly embraced. I fear, my beloved, I fear, my dear children, I fear that when I arrive, I will find your spirits in disarray, your hearts scattered in search of things that destroy, your minds convinced of truths leading you all to the path of your own demise: anger and rage,

suspicion and selfishness, arrogance and condescension. I fear that I will be humbled before Imma, for as your shepherd it is my sacred duty to lead you into life anew, life abundant, and life eternal. I fear that my grief will overwhelm me if I discover that those who once lived for decadence and depravity have not turned their lives toward Imma.

*The grief of leadership is real,  
a necklace of burden,  
heavy upon the neck,  
worn only by those courageous enough to care.  
Or foolish enough, perhaps.*

*Leaders are willing, nonetheless,  
to wear the necklace of grief and burden,  
as a victor's wreath,  
to believe, to trust, to hope that God transforms.  
Only a fool believes otherwise.*

God, it's me. My breath is taken away when I hear Paulo declare that his words are not directed to the Corinthians, but he seeks to be heard before your Court. I am humbled by how often I defend myself against worldly critics and how easily my focus remains fixed on earthly audiences. So when I read that Paulo directs his words as prayers to be heard before the heavenly throne, I am compelled to confess: Abba, in your mercy, forgive me, for there is still much I have to learn in this work of shepherding your people. Teach me to see all people through the eyes of Jesus, hear them as one guided by the Divine Spirit, and incarnate your love to them. Your love calls also to them, and you have sent me to embody it to them.

## 2 Corinthians 13:1-10

As I prepare for my third visit to you, I warn you again as I have warned you before, as Torah declares must happen:

One witness is a rumor,  
two or three together an indictment.<sup>47</sup>

What I spoke to you all in-person I now write to you: I will not spare you from right relationships but will allow the full

weight of Jesus to speak through me. Jesus is no shrinking violet but makes his influence powerful among you all. Yes, Jesus was crucified in frailty, seemingly unable to usher in Abba's kin-dom, until Abba's *dunamis* was revealed through resurrection! In like manner, Abba uses our own frailty to display the dynamic energy revealed in the God-life that causes us to dance to God-rhythms.

So look upon yourselves in the mirror held by Jesus. Do you reflect his truth and beauty, his passion and joy, his strength of character and tenderness of heart? Do you not perceive that Jesus, Abba's own Anointed, lives in you and is your teacher in dancing the God-rhythms? Please tell me you know how to dance the God-rhythms (as we ourselves know quite well, actually)!

We pray to Abba that all y'all will live with genuine<sup>48</sup> trust and authentic hope that will lead you all to acts of loving others, regardless of how "weak" you perceive us to be. In truth, we cannot do anything against the Truth that is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—we live for this Truth and are bold to express it: when we fail, Jesus does not; when we are less, Jesus is more; our brokenness is healed in Jesus' wholeness; our emptiness is filled by Jesus' love. And so we pray—Oh, how Abba knows and can bear witness—every day we pray that our *koinonia*,<sup>49</sup> our sacred communion with one another, may be made whole again.

Because of our passion for reconciliation and restoration, I write to all y'all now. I fervently hope that I will not have to claim my spiritual authority among you when I see y'all face-to-face. I will claim my authority only as I must, for it is the authority with which Abba entrusted me, the authority to build up and make whole and complete rather than tear down and destroy. I pray that I will be able to build you up.<sup>50</sup>

*I do not learn from those who lie to me,  
do not grow as a human being,  
do not open myself to painful truths,  
do not enter upon the sacred journey toward health.*

*Only have I learned from those brave enough  
to hold a mirror before me,  
to show me the wounds I create,  
to invite me upon the sacred journey toward health.*

God, it's me. I pray that I might have the courage to hold a mirror before others and that I might have the same courage to look into the mirror held by others for me. I pray that my coaxing and cajoling of others will be for them a Balm in Gilead and that they would need neither to coax nor cajole me to discover that same Balm. I pray that I might learn and grow and be transformed by your Spirit of grace, mercy, and peace as I look into the mirror, for it is held by those who love me and whom I love. Abba, bind our hearts together as we walk the sacred journey toward right relationships with you, with all, and even with the creation itself.

## Reconciliation and Invitation Section

### 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, 7:2-16<sup>51</sup>

We have spoken the truth in love to you Corinthians with our hearts wide open—inviting you in without hesitation, hoping your own hesitancy is a momentary pause and not hearts closed off to us. Open your hearts, beloved. Make room in your hearts for us that we might share mutual joy.

We have neither disparaged you in word nor damaged you in deed but have protected your innocence and preserved your integrity. I don't say this to make you all feel awkward or obligated to respond in kind. It's just that Imma has engraved your names upon our hearts, which is why we speak so plainly to you. My plain speech to you all is a sign of our great pride in all of you. We appreciate your work for the sake of Jesus and delight that our troubles have not impacted you nor caused y'all harm.

And our troubles have been severe! When we arrived in Macedonia, trouble stalked us like prey. We could not rest because of being harassed—quarrels around every corner, strife before us and contention behind us!<sup>52</sup> We were tempted to embrace our fears rather than hold to our faith. But then Imma, whose comfort is given as presence to all who are broken-hearted, called out to us and drew us into her warm embrace by sending Titus to be with us.<sup>53</sup> And then Titus told us of your comfort of him and longing for me, of your concern and sorrow—oh my, my joy overflowed, and my soul was full.

I acknowledge that my letter to you all caused sorrow. I wish I could say I regret it, but I cannot say such

a thing, for my letter led you to turn away from hard-heartedness and turn toward the God-life! The hurt you felt was not injury but the birthing pangs of new life that Imma caused to grow within you.

There is a sorrow of the heart that Imma sends—a sacred sorrow that cleanses and purifies. Imma's sacred sorrow is not like worldly sorrow, for it does not destroy but creates, does not imprison but liberates, does not weigh down but lifts up. Look at what this sacred sorrow has done for all y'all: eager and earnest, scrupulous in your concern and extravagant in your compassion, wary to avoid injustice yet never weary about doing justice. You are a new Body! (I almost wish I had written you a stern, "Come to Jesus" letter sooner.) So please know that my purpose in writing was not primarily about substance or the content of the issue *du jour*, because issues and problems and complaints will always swirl about. Rather, my purpose in writing was to point y'all toward the mirror that, when looked into, you can see yourselves reflecting Imma's image, knowing your devotion to her and to us would be rekindled.

And so we are encouraged by you. Not only are we encouraged but Titus is encouraged as well, for you all have renewed his spirit. (I had told Titus how wonderful y'all are, so am glad you didn't embarrass me.) Just as what we said to you all was true, so what we said about you all was true. Please know and be assured of this: Titus' affection for you is through the roof, for he found y'all attentive and humble. Even in the midst of our contentious exchanges, I never doubted you for a moment but always had complete and full confidence in all y'all—it never wavered.

*Open hearts  
a gift rarely given.*

*So much easier to hide, to withhold, to protect.*

*Open hearts  
a gift rarely received.*

*Making it easier to rejoice, to share, to love.*

God, it's me. I know the courage it took for Paulo to write the truth in love—sternness and softness commingled upon the page. More courage still is required to speak such words, to allow one's love to remain focused on restoring wholeness, to remain steadfast on the message, to remain humble, too, for we are all broken in our own way. I ache for churches

that have lost this biblical gift. My heart yearns for pastors and elders willing to cultivate the gift of speaking the truth in love to one another. Imma, in your mercy, grant us true courage to walk this path toward your healing mercy and grace.

## 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Now prepare yourselves for having your minds blown away by Imma's marvelous work among the Macedonians. You all know how difficult the Macedonians' circumstances have been—their extreme poverty in terms of economic wealth (though not in spiritual wellness). Their deprivation of material goods did not dissuade them from delivering all they had to give as a gift to Imma, and above and beyond what they had to give. Their poverty of means was overmatched by their abundance of generosity, all of which was inspired by joy upwelling within them.

I could not stop their generosity had I tried! They begged me for the privilege of letting their generosity be an expression of their gratitude for all Imma has done for them. That their offering is to go to Imma's children in Jerusalem and Judea ignited the *dunamis* of their generosity—they consider it a sacred privilege to express their thanksgiving to the saints from whom the Good News was launched, especially in that they know how desperate the plight of Jerusalem is in a time of famine.<sup>54</sup> (In truth, they actually exceeded our expectations.)

"How did they do this wondrous work?" you ask. It is simple: First, they offered<sup>55</sup> themselves up to Imma—in devotion, in prayer, in worship, and in acts of commitment and consecration. Second, they gave themselves to us in covenantal purpose—accepting our sacred desire as belonging to them as well. We called<sup>56</sup> Titus to stand with courage, to lead as a servant to all, to fulfill and complete, to make whole and make perfect,<sup>57</sup> this act of gift among you. And he succeeded in calling you to shine in the privilege of giving, just as we were confident you would do, for you shine in all things: in trust, in what you know and in what you speak, in the way you love and in the eagerness with which you seek to do what is right.

I am not commanding but am challenging y'all. I want to see if the genuineness of your love is matched by the swiftness of your zeal. You know the Story of Jesus: that he released the privilege of heaven for the poverty of earth, that he emptied himself of divine prerogative that you may

be imbued with divine power. What will you do with this Story? How will you live it out? How will you express the glory and grandeur of knowing Jesus?

*"Privilege" is turned upside down by the Gospel:  
to be "white" or "male" or "powerful"  
(or whatever form one's privilege takes)  
is not an excuse for abuse  
(or getting even further ahead simply because I can),  
but an invitation  
to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.*

God, it's me. I know the church in Macedonia. I have met them on mission trips to Central America and Appalachia and among the Indigenous peoples of America. I know their poverty and their wealth as well as I know my own. Their faith bears witness to your great love (and their own) and calls forth from me a response. What will I choose? How shall I live? What will open my heart that I might love more faithfully, more creatively, more tenaciously? How will I be an instrument of blessing? How will I respond to the calling you are even now putting upon my heart?

## 2 Corinthians 8:10-24

I would like to share some counsel about what is best for you all regarding this offering: complete your good work; run all the way through the finish line. Match your aspiration to your inspiration and your devotion to your doing, and get the job done according to the riches Abba has entrusted with all of you. Don't worry if what you give will be enough, for Abba measures our heart's willingness above all else, and we are judged based on what we have rather than what we lack. You will never be judged for not giving what you don't have!

Our goal is equity of effort among all the various gatherings of Abba's children—not that some be stressed while others lounge around in ease, but that all of us will share what we can and do what we can. Your abundance now supports others in their scarcity in the same way their abundance will support you in your scarcity later. As Moses wrote in Torah,

Hey now, everybody take their turn!

Learn to share!

Live simply that others might simply live!<sup>58</sup>

I am grateful that Abba inspired Titus' heart with the same love and concern I have for you. When Titus heard about the need in Jerusalem and that we would ask you to help, he leapt at the opportunity to be the one to come to you to solicit your support. There was no shyness in him about inviting you to this but eagerness and enthusiasm, for he understood inspiring your generosity would be a blessing to you all.

Along with Titus, we are sending a brother<sup>59</sup> acclaimed by all the gatherings of Abba's children for his heart in serving the Good News. He was selected by all the gatherings to bear this honor of collecting the offering and carrying it to Jerusalem. He was eager to help, both as your offering and his service honor Abba. By having Titus and this brother tend the work of your faithful stewardship, we avoid any hint of accusation or perception that we are collecting monies for our own benefit. Never! We seek only to do Abba's will, so we have entrusted the work to those whose integrity shines clear in the light of the sun to both Abba and to all. We also are sending another brother who has proven just and true and believes in you all with much zeal. Titus will lead these brothers, for he is my heart and my hands,<sup>60</sup> while the brothers represent all the beloved who make up the gatherings in Macedonia, who together desire to honor Jesus. Therefore, shower these brothers with love and demonstrate to them why we have praised you all so wholeheartedly.

*'Tis the gift to be simple  
(so desire does not overwhelm values).*

*'Tis the gift to be free  
(from addiction to more).*

*'Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be  
(amidst beloved in just community).*

*And when we find ourselves in the place just right  
(where God, self, and other live in harmony),*

*'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.<sup>61</sup>*

God, it's me. I love that Paulo thought the Corinthians would be blessed by giving. I would have focused on the blessing of the recipients, the poor in Jerusalem. Paulo though understood the joy of generosity is contagious, feeding the spirit with love from a fountain that never runs dry. He knew the need of the giver to give is as great as the need of the receiver to accept what is given. Abba, teach me such boldness the next time I preach a stewardship sermon!

## 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

I know I am preaching to the choir when I encourage you to express your generosity to Imma's children. I bragged on you to the Macedonians about your energy, enthusiasm, and love in wanting to give a gift. I told them, "The brothers and sisters down in central Greece, in Achaia, are ready, willing, able and eager!" But eagerness without planning is like enthusiasm without focus, which is why I am sending Titus and the brothers to help you prepare the gift. Imma forbid that the Macedonians arrive and you're not ready—that would be embarrassing to me and humiliating to you. So I am sending the brothers to help you all fulfill your promise and accomplish what has long been in your heart to do. Waiting to the last minute creates anxiousness and hurry, which can spoil our joy. I want your generosity to be a celebration!

Remember this truth: Whoever plants a little seed will harvest a small garden, but whoever seeds many trees will walk in a forest. Sowing and reaping are cause and effect—a little begets a little, but generosity begets joy. So give what it is in your heart to give, not because you have to but because you want to, for cheerful giving brings Imma joy. Imma will bless you for the work of generosity; indeed, Imma will gift you with the ability to complete what she calls you to accomplish. As the Psalmist wrote,

Scatter gifts to the poor and  
build right relationships that  
abide to the end of the age.<sup>62</sup>

Now she who fills the banquet hall to overflowing,<sup>63</sup> from dirt and rain to fork and table, will fill the harvest of your right relationships to overflowing, for just as y'all are blessed to be a blessing so through your generosity will others become the blessings they, too, are created to be. Your generosity combined with your abundance results in gratitude, gratitude, gratitude. Thanks be to Imma!

Please be assured that the offering you give to Imma will meet the needs of her people—hungry mouths will be fed and parents able to care for their children because of your generosity—and many will give thanks to Imma because of all y'all. Imagine this: Many beloved will sing with joy upwelling because you choose to be obedient not merely in word but in love for the sake of the Good News of Jesus. Many remember y'all in their prayers—their hearts reaching out to embrace you in gratitude. Many give thanks to Imma that she has gifted y'all with such

abundance—both of willingness and ability, of desire and the means to follow through on your desire. Thanks be to Imma!

*Motive without means*  
*Willingness without ability*  
*Desire + Inaction =*  
*Empty Blessing.*

*Love's Double-Helix*  
*Generosity's DNA*  
*Desire wedded to action =*  
*Gratitude, gratitude, gratitude!*

God, it's me. In an era of COVID-19 and stimulus checks, of taxes owed and tax returns received, I find it tempting to watch my bank account rise and fall, as if to judge my well-being "by the numbers." Yet I am created for more than numbers: relationships that nurture, generosity that shares, working with others to build communities of justice and joy. These are the marks of well-being to which I aspire—may I remember them today and refocus my heart's aspirations.

## 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Move forward in joy. Seek always to fit together like pieces of a puzzle<sup>64</sup> through care, concern, and compassion. Even as you argue in your thinking and wrestle with each other over your convictions,<sup>65</sup> do it together as those seeking together to express Imma's *shalom* in your life together. And Imma herself will be and abide with you all, walking with you toward love and harmony.

Greet each other in sacred embrace,<sup>66</sup> as brothers and sisters of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. All the gathering of Imma's children here send greetings. May the gifts of Jesus, Imma's sacred embrace, and the breath of the Divine Spirit form and transform your living into a moment of beauty that lasts into eternity.

*Holy kiss*  
*Soul's delight*  
*Beautiful to walk beside brothers and sisters.*

*Sacred embrace*  
*Spirit's invitation*  
*Finding joy amidst life's trials.*

God, it's me. Paulo's journey with the Corinthians was arduous—his pastorate endured trials, hostility, and even open rebellion. I am oddly encouraged by this fact, for it is clear that both Paulo and the Corinthians were guided by your Spirit. Perhaps when the road becomes rocky in my own ministry, I will remember Paulo and the Corinthians—not sure about the kiss, though, holy or otherwise 😊

## Addendum

### 1 Corinthians 6:13-20 and 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1<sup>67</sup>

**(6:13-20)** I have heard you all say, "Eating is for pleasure and pleasure is for the body! After all, who cares what happens to the "mere physical shell" when Imma is going to destroy it?" Yet the "mere physical shell"—your bodies—are not designed to be degraded but to receive blessing and offer honor to Imma.<sup>68</sup> With your "mere physical shell" as you put it, y'all shower Imma with adoration and praise! The *dunamis* unleashed by Imma raised Jesus from the dead, and this was a bodily resurrection. Likewise, Imma will raise us, in both body and soul, from death to life!

Here's a sacred mystery for you to ponder: each one of you, as an individual, belongs in life and in death, in body and in soul, to Jesus. You are connected with Jesus in the depths of your person in ways that bind you together as one—eternally and forever. So when you ascend to the Greek temple in Corinth to pay your taxes by having sex with one of the temple prostitutes, it may seem innocent to you—"It's just sex." But these prostitutes honor the pagan gods! You are uniting your body with their body, as it says,

The two become one in the flesh by their union.<sup>69</sup>

Your entire person is united with Imma through the Divine Spirit; therefore, flee degradation, turn away from fractured relationships in order to turn toward a union that blesses and brings wholeness. Sexual sin is not worse than other sin, but it does impact your "mere physical shell." What is more, your bodies—taken together to form Imma's holy community—are the real temple in this world, the place in

which Imma dwells and through whom she expresses herself in the world. Please don't degrade what Imma makes beautiful, for Imma gave her beloved son for all y'all, and you are created to honor her in all things, even with your "mere physical shell."

**(6:14–7:1)** So don't be in covenantal relationship with those unwilling or unable to live the God-life. Contracts that bind together right and wrong inevitably go astray. Holy community attempted between light and darkness inevitably leads to the gray twilight of dusk. Holy communion between the Holy One and the evil one cannot occur, and dancing to God-rhythms becomes impractical if not impossible.

It's like this: Abba's dwelling place was never intended for idols but for those who have been called by him and have responded to his call. We respond by entrusting our lives to Abba, with his Divine Spirit serving as the mortar that builds us together into a holy Temple. That's us—Abba's holy Temple, just as Torah and the prophets have said:<sup>70</sup>

I live amidst my people;  
 I walk among them.  
 I am their God;  
     they are my children.  
 I call them away from unholy alliances;  
     I call them to myself.  
 I instruct them to avoid unholy alliances;  
     I welcome them to my bosom.  
 I am the Creator, the Almighty;  
     they are my sons and daughters.

As Abba has promised himself to us (and promised us to himself!), let us cleanse our minds, purify our hearts, and covenant our strength to living the God-life. May all that we are and all that we do be an act of praise and thanksgiving that honors Abba.

*Sometimes I feel as if I am drowning,  
 the rat race hinting I am not a part of  
 the human race.*

*Sometimes I feel as if I can walk on water,  
 as I remember who I am  
 and to whom I belong.*

*I can't, really, walk on water,*

*but I can listen and love,  
 and serve with glad and generous heart.*

*I can walk (on land) in ways that  
 reminds others they, too, are part of the human race  
 and belong to One who rescues them from drowning.*

God, it's me. I acknowledge the grayness of my life. I admit that too often do right and wrong embrace in my life; too easily do light and dark engage in even more intimate caress. It seems impossible to "avoid all unholy alliances," for to do so would require removing my own heart from my chest! The best I can do (or at least what I am willing to try) is to give myself over to you, moment-by-moment and day-by-day. The least I can do (and I am desperate to try) is to open myself to your love, moment-by-moment and day-by-day. Abba, replace all "unholy alliances" in my life with a reliance on you as you infuse my life with right and light.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word used is *apostoleos*, which usually is translated as apostle, from the verb meaning to send; thus sent one.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as holy and literally means set apart—both set apart from and set apart for.

<sup>4</sup> Called *Achaea* or *Achaia* in the ancient world.

<sup>5</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>6</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus' authority as above Caesar's authority.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word is *oikotrimon*, usually translated "compassion" but literally conveys "the spilling of one's guts on to the street," which is a graphic image I chose not to convey in order to keep the devotional PG13.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word *paraklesos*, usually translated as "comfort" or "encouragement," is used an astounding seven times in the next four verses. *Paraklesos* has a sense of invitation attached to it, and functions somewhat like a verb even though it is a noun. I have paraphrased *paraklesos* as "called to comfort." I find this invitational aspect intriguing: comfort not as a state of well-being but as an invitation we receive and welcome.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek verb is *thlibo* and connotes being pressured or squeezed, though translated as the somewhat banal "distressed" in the NIV.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek word is *hupomone* and can be translated either "patient enduring" or "remaining behind." Almost all English translations choose the former; however, I chose the latter because Paulo positioned himself as the one who suffered in (spiritual) battle while the Corinthians remained safe in their homes. At least, this will be the evolution of Paulo's argument against the Corinthians' complaint that he suffers too much.

<sup>11</sup> I am paraphrasing the Greek with the Greek. *Dunamis* is the word translated as "power" but from which we get "dynamite" and "dynamic."

<sup>12</sup> c.f. 1 Corinthians 15.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word *eilikerineia*, usually translated as "sincerity" or "purity," literally means "clear in the light of the sun."

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word used is *charis*, which is usually translated as grace but also carries the connotation of gift.

<sup>15</sup> In verse 1:13 Paulo uses a word play of *ano-ginoskeite* and *epi-gnoskeite*, both of which have "gnosis" or "knowledge" as the root word. The word play seeks to amplify the effect of the knowledge, in my reading, so I have gone further than most translations which merely say "read and understand."

<sup>16</sup> That Paulo's travels originally intended for him to visit Corinth is information learned in verse 23. I refer to it here, roughly in verse 16, to provide context for what he is saying. This is an example where the Corinthians, as the first readers, knowing the situation, would not have needed for context to be shared, but we, Paulo's modern readers, need context to be provided to us for our fullest comprehension.

<sup>17</sup> c.f. 2 Corinthians 8-9 for an elaboration on this reference to the Judean offering.

<sup>18</sup> As readers, we do not yet know why Paulo had not yet returned to Corinth, though we learn in chapters 8-9 that he still has plans to do so.

<sup>19</sup> Although there are a couple of instances in 1 Corinthians where Paulo was direct and forceful, scholars generally agree what Paulo wrote there did not rise to the level of a cause for grieving. It is speculated, with what seems like prudent justification, Paulo wrote other letters and made other visits of which we are unaware. It is unwise to speculate beyond this, and especially foolish to speculate about specifics within the letters, even if it is tempting to allow one's sacred imagination to run wild.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word *lupeo*, translated as "grieve" in the NIV, has the connotation of excessive or volatile emotion. The grief to which Paulo referred, therefore, seems less like the grief of loss through death, for instance, and more the emotional storm so common in congregational life when a member is behaving badly, and the Body is unable or unwilling to set an appropriate boundary.

<sup>21</sup> Earlier in the chapter, in 3:1, Paulo used the Greek word *synestimi*, which ordinarily is translated as "commend" but literally means "stand together." I have chosen to blend the sense of "stand together" with "confidence" or "assurance" (Greek *pepoithesis*) in 3:4 to suggest the true source of our confidence: Jesus stands with us!

<sup>22</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

<sup>23</sup> "Glory" in Paulo's Hebraic upbringing has the sense of light, weightiness (as in being substantive), and reflection. I have chosen

to emphasize the light and reflection nuances though note, too, all service has a substantive weightiness to it.

<sup>24</sup> c.f. Exodus 34:29-35.

<sup>25</sup> Throughout this passage, Paulo played with the words for “hidden” and “veiled.” In Greco-Roman (Hellenistic) culture, there existed many “mystery religions,” which kept their liturgies strictly secret. Paulo appears to contrast the open and transparent message and method of his ministry with the religious practices familiar to the Corinthians in the wider culture.

<sup>26</sup> c.f. Genesis 1:3. Paulo began by quoting Genesis and then added on to the quote with his own *midrash* of the verse. I have chosen to include both verse and *midrash* as part of the quotation.

<sup>27</sup> This passage is best read through the lens of a single accusation: The Corinthians accused Paulo of being a false apostle because his outward troubles seemed to suggest God’s blessing was not with him. In some ways, the Corinthians made assumptions similar to those who practice the “Prosperity Gospel.” Paulo’s response was to claim his troubles—and his ability to persevere through them—were a sign of God’s enduring presence with him.

<sup>28</sup> *Dunamis* is the Greek word for power, from which we also get the word “dynamite” and “dynamic.” It seemed appropriate to paraphrase the Greek with the Greek, for we become more dynamic when we release our power to allow God’s dynamite to unlock opportunities and overcome challenges.

<sup>29</sup> c.f. Psalm 116:10.

<sup>30</sup> The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phelos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love”), and *storge* which is empathy or a close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>31</sup> The text refers to the risk of being found “naked,” which since Genesis 3:10 is a biblical metaphor of fear and shame. Before “the Fall,” Adam and Eve were naked yet unashamed! When the Romans stripped Jesus of his clothes, it was to add shame and humiliation to his physical punishment (Matthew 27:35). Rather than state the word naked, I chose to convey the sense of its biblical meaning.

<sup>32</sup> c.f. John 14:6, though this phrase is not in the 2 Corinthians text.

<sup>33</sup> Not to be too Presbyterian about this point, but the Greek word used is *katergazomai*, which combines *kata*, “down, exactly according to,” and intensifies with *ergazomai*, “work, accomplish.” The literal translation might be, “work down to the end-point,” “to an exact, definite conclusion,” or “bring to decisive finality, end-conclusion.” There is a purposefulness conveyed in this verse which points toward Calvin’s (much maligned) doctrine of election.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek word *tharreo* can be translated as “show boldness” or “show courage.” The NIV choose a variation on the former by translating this as “confidence.” With due respect to the NIV translators, given that Paulo was quite bold and confident, I hear a tremendous amount of physical, emotional, and spiritual

courage in Paulo’s testimony regarding his ministry and believe these verses connect to his testimony in the previous chapter.

<sup>35</sup> The Greek word *philotiméomai* is a combination of “lover” and “that which is honored” and is usually translated as “ambitious.” That the NIV chose to translate this as “please [Jesus]” seems an odd choice (or at least not sufficiently forceful). I hear a passion and an eagerness in Paulo’s yearning to make good and be found worthy on the Day of Judgment.

<sup>36</sup> The NIV translates *sunecho* as “compel” while the NRSV translates it as “urge.” As single word translations they are far superior to what I have written. However, *sunecho* also connotes “press together” and “press close on every side,” so I have chosen to experiment with a bit of wordplay to evoke a more descriptive image for the sense of urgency I believe Paulo felt.

<sup>37</sup> c.f. Isaiah 49:8.

<sup>38</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for time, (*chronos* is the other). It distinguishes the key moment of change from chronological time.

<sup>39</sup> The word *apostoleo* literally means “sent one.”

<sup>40</sup> The word *kauxaomai* is usually translated as “boast” or “exult” but the root meaning refers to “heads held high.” As Paulo used *kauxaomai* five times in the next six verses, I have chosen to play with the colloquially English phrase and accompanying image. Rather than convey boasting or bragging, I seek to convey the sense of being justifiably proud, or at least unashamed, of one’s work.

<sup>41</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 9:24.

<sup>42</sup> Ministries such as No More Deaths routinely leave water in the desert to prevent immigrants from dying of dehydration. To support No More Deaths, go to [www.nomoredeaths.org](http://www.nomoredeaths.org).

<sup>43</sup> c.f. 2 Baruch 8, in the Apocrypha, written during the two centuries before Jesus’ life, for a sense of multiple levels of heaven. Traditionally the phrase “the third heaven” is used and connotes a heavenly level just below the highest heaven where God’s throne is found.

<sup>44</sup> Paulo was clearly referring to himself but uncomfortable with making his mystical vision the basis of his authority.

<sup>45</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:12 uses the Greek words, *semeiois*, *teras*, and *dunamis*, which are often translated as “signs, wonders and miracles” in English translations. However, “signs, wonders and miracles” have taken on a particular connotation, especially among Pentecostal Christians, that is not necessarily conveyed by the Greek. I have sought to capture the essence of “signs, wonders and miracles” in my paraphrase.

<sup>46</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:16 is difficult, for it uses an obscure word, *dolos*, whose meaning is “bait.” The NIV translates the key phrase, “...but crafty as I am, I caught you by trickery,” which seems dissonant from Paulo’s logic in this section, so I have tried to capture his thought using a more colloquial phrase.

<sup>47</sup> The citation is from Deuteronomy 19:15 and Paulo used repetition of his warnings as sufficient basis for claiming the mandate for “two or three witnesses” was met, which, if I am honest, seems an odd interpretation of the Deuteronomic text.

<sup>48</sup> Paulo used the word *dokimos* four times in verses 5-7. The NIV translates *dokimos* as “test,” but it has the connotation of “genuine,” as in “the genuine article.” I have attempted in these verses to diminish the sense of “testing,” with its juridical connotation in this era of No Child Left Behind and litmus tests for political correctness. I am seeking to convey the sense of having a faith that is genuine and authentic, which seems to convey Paulo’s hopes for the Corinthians.

<sup>49</sup> *Koinonia* in Greek means intimate, spiritual communion.

<sup>50</sup> This sentence is not in the Greek text but I sense it is unspoken sub-text of his argument: Paulo did not want to have to “crack the whip,” though he was willing to do so if required.

<sup>51</sup> Scholars agree that verses 6:14-18 are a textual fragment inserted into the text—a portion of a letter lost to history except for this fragment. The reader can see this by reading verses 6:13 and 7:2 consecutively: “...open wide your hearts also...Make room for us in your hearts....” (NIV) Therefore, I have chosen to keep the textual unit together in order to maintain the coherence of Paulo’s message to the Corinthians and will paraphrase 6:14-18 as a separate passage.

<sup>52</sup> After being vague about the nature of their “troubles,” Paulo finally defined them by use of the Greek word *machai*, which connotes “quarrels, strife, or contention.” Evidently, Paulo and his colleagues encountered the same kind of “troubles” that are common in today’s churches.

<sup>53</sup> As mentioned in note 8, *parakaleo* translates as comfort yet may carry a verbal connotation of “to invoke” or “to invite.” As well, *parakaleo* may carry a physical connotation of “to draw near.” I have attempted to capture both connotations.

<sup>54</sup> That famine was the likely *raison d'être* for the offering is not in the 2 Corinthians text but is the scholarly consensus.

<sup>55</sup> I attempt in the following verb choices to convey a sense of worship (“offer...up”) and covenantal commitment (“gave...”) in order to delineate the greater devotion due to God and the lesser, yet still significant, commitment due to one another.

<sup>56</sup> The Greek word used here is *parakaleo* (see note 8), which is translated in 1:3-7 as “comfort” (NIV and NRSV) but can also be translated as “invoke,” “encourage,” or “urge.” I find in this “word tree” an interesting, even fascinating connection between wellness, motivation, and the desire to do acts of goodness.

<sup>57</sup> The Greek word at the heart of the phrase translated in the NIV as “complete this act” is *epiteleo*, which is a cognate of *teleios*. *Teleios* is most famously found in Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,” where *teleios* means “to fulfill, to complete, to make whole, or to make perfect.” Paulo is using theologically loaded words to describe Titus’ (and the Corinthians’) work in this offering. Perhaps Paulo’s use of *parakaleo* and *epiteleo* are mere coincidence, or perhaps he intended the Corinthians to view their offering through the lens of having a theological purpose and divine mandate to care for others.

<sup>58</sup> c.f. Exodus 16:18. I freely admit these words are more “interpretation” than “paraphrase.”

<sup>59</sup> The brother is anonymous, unnamed by Paulo.

<sup>60</sup> The Greek words used are *koinonos* and *sunergon*, which I have paraphrased as “heart and hands.” *Koinonia* is a word that conveys deep connection and intimate, spiritual fellowship, while *sunergon* is a compound word meaning literally “with work.” These descriptors suggest to me Paulo’s affection and respect for Titus as well as convey the twin pillars of all Gospel service.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Brackett, quoted in Edward D. Andrews, *The Gift to be Simple: Songs, Dances and Rituals of the American Shakers* (New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher, 1940. Popularized by Aaron Copeland in 1944, Old American Songs, Set 1.

<sup>62</sup> c.f. Psalm 112:9.

<sup>63</sup> Paulo used the interesting Greek word *epichoregeo*, which means “richly supply everything needed for an ancient chorus to be a grand production – properly, lavishly supply, as it is suitable (apt) to outfit all that is needed to accomplish a grand objective.” (Biblehub.com/Greek/2023) Then Paulo connected this grand supply to “harvest of righteousness” (NIV), which begs the question: What is Abba’s grand objective in blessing some with an abundance? The answer given in the Greek text is *dikaiosisune*, right relationships among rich and poor, aka a just society.

<sup>64</sup> The Greek word used is *katartizo*, which means “fit or join together” but which the NIV surprisingly translates as “restoration.”

<sup>65</sup> The Greek word used is *phroneo*, often translated as “be of one mind,” but is difficult to translate fully into English, for it has connotations of both cognitive and visceral thinking, which I have chosen to translate as thinking and conviction.

<sup>66</sup> Customarily translated as “holy kiss.” Paulos clearly did not write in a culture of boundaries training and sexual misconduct prevention policies!

<sup>67</sup> This passage includes the textual fragment (i.e. a bit of a letter that was unmoored from its original context and inserted by an ancient copyist rather randomly into 2 Corinthians), which has linguistic and thematic resonance with 1 Corinthians 6:13-20. I have chosen to include both passages here in order to imagine what Paulos’ message might sound like if they were originally connected as a complete, coherent thought. I will note when the 1 Corinthian passage ends and 2 Corinthians passage begins.

<sup>68</sup> Paulo was inconsistent throughout this passage in his use of the singular and plural forms of “you,” so it is difficult to convey precisely when Paulo refers to an individual’s body (as in sex) versus the collective “Body” (as in the Body of Christ). I attempted to convey a sense that each individual is accountable, and individuals impact the community.

<sup>69</sup> c.f. Genesis 2:24.

<sup>70</sup> c.f. Leviticus 26:12; 2 Samuel 7:8 and 14; Isaiah 49:8 and 52:11; Jeremiah 32:38; Ezekiel 20:34, 41 and 37:27.

# PRAYING GALATIANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING GALATIANS

My intention in the larger work of *Praying Paul* series is to experiment with reading and hearing the biblical text through new perspectives in order to see more deeply the truths conveyed in the Word of God. Often the experiments are linguistic or cultural to provide insights into 1<sup>st</sup> century life and how the original recipients would have heard the letter read. Throughout *Praying Paul*, I have experimented with gender inclusivity, alternating the use of Abba and Imma (the Aramaic diminutives for daddy and mommy) when speaking of God.

As something of a traditionalist personally, I am comfortable using gender exclusive God talk: “Father” is a comfortable name for me to use when I pray to God. What I am learning about myself as I have adopted the practice of using both Abba and Imma is that I am more open to envisioning and embracing God’s caring, nurturing nature; more open to the significant ways exclusively male pronouns might build a thin, invisible barrier between God and (at least some of) my sisters in Christ. I am becoming more open to the ways exclusively male pronouns subtly elevate the male voice above the female voice. My growing awareness of these gender dynamics and gender inequalities may be obvious to many of you readers; however, I am only telling you my journey as I am walking it. Conversely, there may be some of you readers for whom my experience is foreign territory.

Foreign territory need not be hostile territory. The people of faith whose stories are conveyed as 1,500 years of biblical history often (even usually) sojourned among people not their own: Abram and Sarai from Ur of the Chaldees, Joseph in Egypt, Ruth the Moabitess, the Israelites first in the desert, later in Assyrian and Babylonian exile, and then remaining in a kind of exile (under foreign rule) even while in their own homeland. As people of faith, walking in foreign territory is what we do. Or, at least, foreign territory is where we learn.

For my experiment in Galatians of reading and hearing the biblical text through new perspectives, I have made a small, simple, yet significant change: I call the author of Galatians “Paula.” Previous works in this series have called the Apostle by the names Paulos, Pablo, and Paulo. I sought in choosing names other than the English “Paul” to help readers open our spirits to the global, intercultural nature of God’s Word. Then it occurred to me: why stop with other languages and cultures? What would happen if I had “Paula” write Galatians?

For some readers, this experiment may go too far. Please believe me when I say I am not seeking to be sacrilegious with Scripture. Also believe me when I confess that at times during the writing of *Praying Galatians* I have struggled with my decision to refer to the Apostle as Paula.

I wonder about my reticence. Is it that I am at heart a literalist? Is it that my academic training grounded me in serious historicism for interpreting the text? Or, perhaps, is it that I am uncomfortable with having gender hierarchies reversed: Paula’s female voice being the voice of authority?

Whatever the reason for my discomfort, I acknowledge it and am sitting with the discomfort as the Holy Spirit does work within me. What the result of the Spirit’s work will be remains to be seen, but I am confident my journey will continue and be a journey of grace.

Having decided to call the Apostle Paula, I then had to decide upon a muse: What woman pastor conveys the proper strength and directness yet with compassion? Many friends and colleagues came to mind, but I decided on a more public figure: the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Webber,<sup>1</sup> whom I have never met but who conveys, for me, just the right sense for this experiment in hearing God’s Word.

Galatians, the letter, is Paula’s fiercest tone—fiery even—she is incensed the Galatians have abandoned the message of Jesus’ Cross by reverting to the practice of circumcision. Paula is outraged the Galatians have, in her view, willingly embraced slavery to Torah. Galatians is her devastating defense of the necessity of trusting God for one’s life and willingly embracing slavery only for the sake of serving Jesus. Paula’s tone is direct and forceful, and her argumentation precise and thorough.

The choice to use “slave” and “bondage” instead of “servant” and “servitude” was difficult. In my initial draft of this work, I used servant rather than slave to avoid the incendiary and negative connotations of slavery—as a way of repudiating the practice as repugnant. My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Michael Hegeman, argued convincingly in an editorial critique that, “the whole letter hinges upon the dichotomy between slave and free. We do not hear of the emancipation of Jesus keenly enough unless we perceive the offense of our condition as slavery.” Therefore, I adopt the use of slave rather than servant throughout.

Brad Munroe

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## Galatians 1:1-5

Paula, a sent one<sup>2</sup>—sent not from mere people, certainly not a man, but by “The One,” (you know who I mean): Jesus and Imma, who raised Jesus from being dead—yeah, and I have the sisters standing beside me, brothers, too. To the churches of central Turkey:<sup>3</sup> Loving-kindness<sup>4</sup> and inner wholeness be yours as a gift from Imma and Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar<sup>5</sup> and who poured himself out for us, a liberation mission during this broken era. Jesus did this because of Imma’s yearning, to stem the tide of ever-rising brokenness, to evoke wonder and invite joy—and, for Imma’s praise, to ignite a chorus of “Alleluias.” Oh, yes, so may it be.

*I’m not sure I understand “gender” anymore.*

*It used to be so simple.*

*Binary application has given way to continuum.*

*I’m not sure I am ready for the world as it is becoming.*

*I am sure I am ready for a world of inclusion and love, even if it’s complex.*

*Diversity, equity and inclusion are never simple, after all.*

*I am sure of that.*

God, it’s me. I am the author of this work. I chose to call Paul by the feminine “Paula.” Still, it freaks me out. Am I always freaked out by something new? I wasn’t always this way. I remember I wasn’t freaked out by new things when I was a child, nor even as a youth. I suspect my hardening of heart is congruent within and without, growing spiritually as it has physically (into my 50’s!). Imma, when did I become my father’s generation? When I look deeply into my soul, why am I someone I barely recognize? Where is the young man of fertile mind and sharp tongue, (though still a kind spirit)? Imma, please, teach me, a middle-aged, white man of significant privilege, joy in learning from...Paula.

## Galatians 1:6-10

Dumping me are you? (And by text at that!) Not even so much as a phone call to tell me you have found another? And you are doing this after I invited you to live into the loving-kindness of Jesus, Abba’s Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar! Let me be clear: you are dumping me for a group of “suitors” whose alleged “Good News” is not really good at all but a twisted, chaotic perversion of the actual Good News about Jesus. And I could care less how

“suave and debonair” these other suiters might be, how charming or handsome: What they are saying is a lie, a distortion of the truth! If I were the kind to pray for lightning to be sent their way, I would. Lucky for them I care only about what Abba desires—his purpose is my only duty. No people pleasing for me. No offering myself in service to mere mortals. If I cared about pleasing people, I would not be a very good slave of Jesus,<sup>6</sup> but being a slave of Jesus and his loving-kindness: That’s all that matters to me.

*Single-minded devotion*

*Off putting stench to some*

*Alluring aroma to others*

*Loving-kindness seared into the heart*

*All-or-Nothing*

*No compromise*

God, it’s me. I grieve the hold appearances have on the faithful—bright lights and big tech having replaced compassion and prayer. I confess there is a part of me that is lured by appearances, too. I confess that I wish we Presbyterians did the bright lights and big tech stuff better, for then we would be more “successful” in drawing people into our pews! Abba, forgive my shallow musings, and renew within me a devotion to your Gospel: embodying your loving-kindness in word and deed.

## Galatians 1:11-24

You need to know the Good News I dropped on you doesn’t come from me, nor from any other person—it’s of divine origin. I got it straight from Jesus’ lips, the Anointed One my personal tutor, no Sunday School classes for me.

You may remember my story: growing up Judean, I was all intensity, rigor and rage. I attacked the gathering<sup>7</sup> wherever I found it hiding; sweeping “Jesus followers” from the face of the earth was my heavenly goal. My peers looked at the bottom of my shoes as I passed each one by—fervent and fanatical in all things and for all things rooted in “Tradition.” Then Imma happened, and I was never the same.

Little did I suspect when I was growing up that Imma had sent her Divine Spirit into my mama’s womb to breathe loving-kindness upon me. I had no idea, of course, but Imma’s sacred yearning was to introduce me to her

son, Jesus. She wanted me to embrace Jesus as friend and healer and sovereign so that I might introduce Greeks and Romans and Egyptians to him—I was to be Jesus’ mouthpiece to the Nations. Well, when this divine calling was placed upon me, I didn’t search out a class, not even from the sent ones who knew Jesus when he walked this earth as a human being. Instead, I went to the desert for some one-on-one time with Imma and Jesus and their Divine Spirit.

It took me three years of study and prayer before I felt prepared to journey to Jerusalem for some face time with the sent ones. I spent a couple of weeks with Peter and saw James, Jesus’ brother, once or twice. (I’m telling you the Imma’s-honest truth!) Later I traveled around Syria and southern Turkey.<sup>8</sup> None of the gatherings knew me, only that “she who tortured Jesus is now telling his Good News to one and all.” Their hearts were filled with wonder, awe and joy at this news.

*Imma happens.  
My plans implode.*

*Imma happens.  
Purpose is given.*

*Imma happens.  
The unimaginable becomes reality.*

*Imma happens.  
What will come next?*

God, it’s me. I once had a mentor tell me, “We all have a seminary library living within us.” It was his way to invite me to get out of my head and begin to trust my heart. It was his way to encourage me to begin, with baby steps, to trust my intuition, to listen to the still, small whisper of your Spirit. It was his way to instruct me to get out of the way and let You go to work. Oh, Imma, I miss my mentor sometimes. Will you take his place today? Is it too much for me to ask to learn directly from You?

## **Galatians 2:1-10**

Fourteen years later I journeyed to Jerusalem again—this time with my ministry partner Barbara and our brother, Titus.<sup>9</sup> Jesus had uncovered to me his Good News,<sup>10</sup> and I desired to confer with those respected as the

leaders of Jesus’ gathering. I told them I preach to non-Jews a Good News message that means freedom from the ritual constraints of Torah,<sup>11</sup> though not its ethical norms. I preach a Good News message that means freedom for Abba’s Divine Spirit guiding us by loving-kindness into love whole and complete. I confirmed for these respected leaders that I was leading others toward Abba’s kin-dom and not astray and was pleased to hear their words of “Amen.” Even Titus, an uncircumcised Greek, was blessed to continue following Jesus without need of Torah’s ritual obligations!

This meeting took place even though liars—manipulators of the truth and destroyers of wholeness—snuck into our preaching and teaching and then distorted our message into something tawdry. They sought to steal away our freedom and enslave us once again to fear, compulsion and scrupulosity to a dead literalism. But we saw right through them. Not for an instant did we surrender our conviction. Our solitary purpose was to preserve the goodness found in Jesus’ Good News.

Now I should add that, with due respect for those leaders who are held in high esteem, Abba has no favorites. We are all equal in Abba’s sight. These leaders added nothing to my Good News message—not a word. Indeed, they realized Jesus had given me his Good News message personally and had sent me specifically to proclaim this Good News to non-Jews.

Jesus sent Peter to the Jews and me to the non-Jews—the so-called Nations. Abba worked through Peter for the sake of the circumcised, whose belonging to Abba’s family was celebrated on the eighth day of their life.<sup>12</sup> And Abba worked through me for the sake of the Nations—sending me to announce that they, too, belong to Abba’s family. Ya’akov, Petra, and Johanna,<sup>13</sup> the respected leaders of the gathering, were tickled to give us their blessing. They celebrated that Jesus’ loving-kindness accompanied us and was at work through us. They affirmed our calling from Abba and asked only that we would remember to serve the poor,<sup>14</sup> which is what we always do and are eager to continue.

*The journey to freedom can feel  
like a trek to a distant land,  
filled with detours and dangers and hope.*

*The journey is inward  
inviting us to push boundaries set by fear  
to become those created to bear Jesus’ image.*

*The journey is one I walk today:  
 fatigued yet exhilarated  
 ready to discover what comes next.*

God, it's me. Thank you that your loving-kindness is upon me and upon us, with me and with us, through me and through us. Thank you that your loving-kindness leads me and leads us toward the freedom of being our true selves—created to reflect the image of Jesus to the world. Thank you that your loving-kindness lifts up the humble and levels the haughty, making new creation in which we live and move and have our being. Abba, may I never tire of the journey, for it is a journey ever deeper into your loving-kindness.

### **Galatians 2:11-14**

Now let me tell you about my showdown with Peter—it was quite a confrontation! I refused to tolerate any mealy-mouthed platitudes—actions are what mattered. Peter used to eat with the non-Jews, treating them like family, like the brothers and sisters they are.<sup>15</sup> Then some privileged folk from the Big City Church in Jerusalem—men of status and power—visited, and Peter caved to their pressure, conforming to their broken values that divided people into “in” groups and “out” groups, that defined “acceptable” and “worthless” based on superficial differences. Our sense of community was fractured. Other Jews felt the pressure to go-along-to-get-along, too, and even Barbara was swept away by the floodwaters of social conformity.<sup>16</sup>

I was pissed! I got in Peter's face, I tell you, because I saw the hypocrisy. Even worse, I saw Peter and the others were distorting the truth of Jesus' Good News—breaking the bonds of Imma's community through racial profiling. I was having none of it. I said to Peter in front of the whole gathering, including the privileged men from the Big City, “You hypocrite! You're Jewish yet live like all the Greeks and Romans who are not Jewish. You live just the same as they live yet pressure them to conform? They are your brothers and sisters, yet you seek to coerce them to follow ritual customs you have abandoned?”<sup>17</sup>

*Oh hell no!  
 Not on my watch!*

*Fury embraces truth in the prophet.  
 Protest plants a flag and says, “Not a step farther.”*

*Even friends must be confronted.  
 Even saints get it wrong.*

God, it's me. You know I am a “sequentialist.” I believe in accepting people where they are and then leading them one step at a time toward your Beloved Community. You know I am not a “plant the flag in the ground,” get-in-your-face, ready-to-rumble kind of leader. If I worked in government, I would choose the State Department's diplomacy rather than the military's saber rattling. So I am unnerved by Paula's directness, by her willingness to confront sin. Yet I see how Paula's confronting sin was for the sake of her sisters and brothers. Even more, she was fierce in her defense of the Gospel's first principles: all people are created *imago dei*,<sup>18</sup> in your image. On this truth there is no compromise. Imma, make me more like Paula, (even if you must lead me there one step at a time).

### **Galatians 2:15-21**

We say to ourselves, “We are Abba's chosen—belonging to Abba is our birthright!” Yet we deceive ourselves when we condemn others, saying, “We're not like those born in different lands, whose fathers and mothers we do not know—sinners all of them!” Even more, we who have belonged to Abba from birth, who have inhaled freedom from our first breath, know that our birthright was not earned but received as a gift—as loving-kindness. We know that it is our confidence in what Abba has done in Jesus that is the basis of our friendship with the Eternal One. Torah, Abba's tutor for our souls, cannot heal our broken relationships, but it does prepare us for the Good News of what Abba has done and is doing in Jesus. It is not what we have done but what Abba has done in Jesus that heals our broken relationship with the Holy One.

If our broken humanity is revealed by seeking to be made right with Abba through Jesus, is that Abba's fault? Never! Healing cannot begin until the malady is acknowledged. And if I embrace again that which I had previously loosed,<sup>19</sup> that would be most foolish. I really would be self-deceived to prefer my goodness to Abba's loving-kindness.

Torah is my beloved tutor,<sup>20</sup> for it taught me all that I must do to be in right relationship<sup>21</sup> with Abba, my neighbor, and the creation itself. Torah, my beloved tutor, showed me also that I cannot uphold all that I must do.

Therefore, I rejoice, for I participate in Jesus' Cross. I have been placed with Jesus in the darkness of his tomb that my false self might die. I share in the holy communion of his death that I might live in the beloved community of his life. I do this by trusting that Abba loves me, and Jesus surrendered himself for me. I do not take lightly Abba's gracious gift. I do not set it aside to see if my goodness might be greater. Rather, I embrace the truth that Torah, my beloved tutor, cannot lead me into right relationship with Abba; otherwise, Jesus did not need to surrender himself for us.

*The surrender of Jesus for all  
leads to my surrendering:*

*relaxing my heart (and neck and shoulders, too)  
releasing my destiny to another*

*exhaling breath  
embracing my belovedness*

*abandoning all pretense of self-sufficiency  
accepting the God-life as a gift.*

God, it's me. In my quiet moments, I know Paula is correct: My relationship with you is not about my goodness but your loving-kindness. In my quiet moments, this is my theology and my trusting. In most moments, however, I live according to a different truth: I must produce, achieve, and succeed! In too many of these moments, I diminish, neglect, and forget that all my action and activity cannot define me. In such moments when action and activity predominate, teach me to trust anew that I belong to you. Then lift my eyes to all those whom you also love that all my action may be in service of your justice and my every activity lead to your joy.

### **Galatians 3:1-14**

You foolish Galatians! Did someone make a voodoo doll of your likeness? Trick you into behaving like you are out of your minds? We spelled it out in big, bold, block letters: JESUS WAS IMPALED UPON A ROMAN CROSS! Was Imma's Divine Spirit breathed into you, or did you manufacture it out of thin air? Was the Spirit a gift received as blessing or built through your own grit and determination? Was not the Spirit breathed

into you because you trusted in the *dunamis*<sup>22</sup> radiating from Jesus' self-emptying love? You opened yourself to Imma that she might form and transform your true self, and now you take back control of your own becoming! How foolish can you be?

Let's look at Abraham as a model for how the God-life works. In Torah we read:

Abraham trusted Imma,  
and she honored his wise decision:  
Imma brought Abraham into right relationship.<sup>23</sup>

After the example of Abraham, those who trust Imma open themselves to her first-love.<sup>24</sup> They respond to Imma's first-love with a desire to share her love and express her love. They allow Imma's first-love love to shape, form and transform their true self. These are her beloved children and so are also called Abraham's children in faith. Torah saw and perceived the nature of Imma's Way: the nations would be blessed by those she called to be her blessing.<sup>25</sup> Blessed to be a blessing is the path Abraham's children walk—receiving love in our own person in order to share it with all people, paying Imma's loving-kindness forward to all whom we meet.

Let's look at the rest of Torah. What does it say? Imma's standard is perfection, (which no one can attain).

If you break the law, you've disobeyed it:  
You're a lawbreaker!<sup>26</sup>

You don't become innocent by being a lawbreaker but by trusting Imma to overshadow you with mercy:

Right relationships are a gift,  
received by trusting the giver.<sup>27</sup>

Obedying the law has its place in the life of one who seeks Imma's will, but it is difficult not to stumble.

Obedying the law is good  
and requires doing it in all of one's living.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus, impaled upon a Roman cross, took into his beating heart the debris and detritus of every human heart, and so became for us a path out of our own darkness.

Doomed and destroyed!  
Bearing the scars in one's own self!  
A timber for a spine.<sup>29</sup>

In becoming darkness, Jesus showed us the light. In giving himself to the path of death, Jesus opened to us the Way of life. The prison of his tomb becomes for us the womb of rebirth in freedom, gifting to us the ability to trust the promise: Imma will give her Divine Spirit.

*First-love  
hyperventilating on her doorstep  
awkward, teenage kiss  
hoping her dad doesn't catch us.*

*First-love  
many years later, my little girl swaddled in a blanket  
tears of joy  
her warrior-mom exhausted.*

*First-love  
embraced for eternity  
assurance  
blessed to be a blessing.*

God, it's me. The choice is always before me: to do or to be? To hold on or to let go? My goodness or your grace? Put in these terms, the choice seems obvious—easy to say the “theologically correct” answer. Yet I confess the choice sneaks up on me when I am not mindful—without thinking I too often trust my ways instead of your Way. In the midst of my busy life, I too easily fall prey to spiritually toxic beliefs. I think I can be perfect, or should at least try to be perfect, and then castigate myself when (not if) I fail. How much kinder to myself when I accept your invitation to rest in loving-kindness, freely extended as a gift. How energizing when I remember your first-love and rest in its promise.

### **Galatians 3:15-22**

Sisters and brothers, family all: I have given examples from Abraham and Torah for the primacy of trust. Now let me give an example from our everyday life in this day and age.<sup>30</sup> No one is allowed to add to a human contract; that is, once established it is binding and cannot be amended. Much more a divine covenant is binding and cannot be amended, for it is a sacred promise made and enacted by Abba! Abba spoke such a sacred promise—that is, made a covenant—to Abraham and “Abraham's seed.” Notice the singular use of “seed” rather than “seeds.” That

is, the promise refers not to many people but to a single (and singular) person: Jesus!<sup>31</sup>

What this means is that the promise made to Abraham was that Jesus would be the One through whom all the Nations would be blessed, would be redeemed, would receive Abba's loving-kindness. And this happened well before Torah was given: 430 years before! If Torah came first, it would have primacy of place and importance. However, the promise to Abraham preceded the giving of Torah; therefore, being welcomed into Abba's kin-dom comes through the promise of loving-kindness rather than obedience to Torah.

So then, you might ask, why was Torah given at all? Great question! Torah is the bridge between Abba's promise and its fulfillment, between knowing the good and doing the good, between our trying and God doing, between our falling and God standing, between our failing and God healing and making all things right, just and good.

Torah is like an attorney: a go-between among warring parties—only we are at war with our own selves. Remember this: Abba is One—whole and complete in himself. Torah, though, is the mediator, speaking to who we are in our brokenness yet also to who we are becoming by Abba's loving-kindness. Torah is not opposed to Abba's desire for our wholeness! Yet neither is Torah capable of creating that wholeness in us. If Torah could command our obedience and enforce our right, just, and good behavior, it would! But it does not have such authority. Only by trusting Abba's promise do our spirits and souls open. Only by trusting Abba does the work of his transformation begin. Only Abba can make this happen!

*Seed  
planted before memory existed  
germinating for eons  
ages come, ages pass, ages still await.*

*Seed  
sprouting within hard soil  
drought and neglect its only nutrients  
what chance of survival this?*

*Seed  
blooming among thistles  
thorns as close companions  
dying into the soil.*

*Seed*  
*how sweet the lily smells*  
*how tender its petals*  
*how beautiful the blessing of God.*

God, it's me. I was taught from a young age: Law vs. Gospel, as if they are in opposition. Yet Paula seems to love Torah, love "the Law." Is it because she sees Torah as your gift? Is it because she knows its rhythms are tender and just? Is it because she perceives you gave Torah to accompany us, to be your emissary in the God-life? Perhaps, Abba, I have misunderstood what Paula has always been teaching—not "Law vs. Gospel" but "Law then Gospel" or even "Law and Gospel."

### **Galatians 3:23-29**

Let me give yet another example for the primacy of trust: before we opened ourselves to Imma's gentle guidance, we were like those locked in a high tower for our own protection until we could learn to trust. Torah was our tutor, our *paidagogos*,<sup>32</sup> while in the tower, given by Imma and commanded to ensure our upbringing as proper citizens. When Jesus the Anointed was unveiled in the world, Torah stepped aside so that he could be our model for all things belonging to Imma: how to live as those who seek and perform the right, just and good and how to walk the cruciform Way of Jesus. When Jesus the Anointed was unveiled in the world, we were released from our tower and invited to dance to God-rhythms that bring joy to Imma's heart. Because of Jesus the Anointed, we do not need Torah to be our *paidagogos* any longer.

In, through and with Jesus the Anointed, all y'all are Imma's children through trusting. All who have been immersed into the living waters of Jesus the Anointed have clothed themselves with him—each one of you wear a "Jesus Suit"! Each and every one of y'all is unique even while you are all the same.<sup>33</sup> Each and every one of y'all keep what makes you truly "you" even while all barriers are broken down: all hierarchies collapsed, all social barriers removed, all spiritual distinctions made equal. It matters not your race: Jew and Gentiles are equally Imma's beloved. It matters not your social station: slaves are liberated to be equals with the patriarchs of the household and powerful of society. It matters not your economic status: the poor are elevated to the status of equity with the privileged in Imma's beloved community. It matters not

your gender: those oppressed through violence, exclusion, and fear are set free to be who they are. If you belong to Jesus, that's all that matters: all y'all are Abraham's great, great grandkids through trusting Imma and, therefore, will embrace the promise of her loving-kindness.

*Diversity*  
*Equity*  
*Inclusion*

*Demanding*  
*Engaging*  
*Insistent*

*Doing good for all*  
*Equality becoming incarnate*  
*In Christ*<sup>34</sup>

God, it's me. I am among the most privileged of your beloved: born a U.S. citizen, white, male, from a middle-class family of two parents who remained married, a college education assured to me as a birthright. I live amidst a people of great diversity, for whom Paula's dream of equity, inclusion and justice remain a waking nightmare. Teach me, Imma, the importance of listening, of allowing other voices to be expressed, of seeking to build Beloved Community in word and deed. Transform me, Imma, into the kind of person for whom "emptying myself," (like Jesus did!), is not only ethical choice but spiritual habit.

### **Galatians 4:1-11**

An example of our relationship with Torah, as our *paidagogos*, comes from our own households:<sup>35</sup> obedience is required of the children, for they are treated like a common, powerless slave. Though the children are heirs (and, legally, everything will belong to them eventually), the father rules the household with complete and often brutal control. The children are treated the same as the slave, bound to the same perverse household rules and hierarchies. This state continues until the father graciously changes the situation. Until such time as set by the whim of the father, the tutelage continues but cannot emancipate.<sup>36</sup>

In the same way, we were like children bound by the household rules of spiritual physics<sup>37</sup>—unable to tutor ourselves toward wisdom, unwilling to confront the

powerful forces that shaped and formed us in ways that obscured our true self. We cannot emancipate ourselves.

But then Abba set the date of our emancipation: sending forth Jesus—born of a woman, born under Torah—to restore our true selves and adopt us as his own beloved. Abba sent Jesus’ Divine Spirit into our hearts. Abba made us able to call him, “Father!” Abba made us willing to oppose the forces that seek to rob us of our deliverance: We are Abba’s children—sons and daughters—and therefore heirs of the kin-dom.

Before knowing Abba, we were subjugated to a broken spiritual physics, to rules that distorted our inner self and distracted us from our true purpose. Now that we know Abba (and are known by Abba!), we must not give ourselves to the old rules that lead to our own imprisonment. Why choose incarceration when liberation has been given us as a gift? I ask, as an example, about your belief that merely observing ritual practices is an adequate substitute for full-throated praise, or that such observance offered up as obligation rather than sacred intention can shape, form and transform you.<sup>38</sup> I fear I have worked among you for no reason.

*Like gravity  
I fall  
thudding upon dirt.*

*My father  
reaches down his hand  
lifting me back to my feet.*

*Walking again  
I learn to run  
with my dad beside me.*

*This  
the path  
I was created to travel.*

God, it’s me. I hear Paula’s exhortations: Be free! Be an adult—choosing to walk as one who is wise and whole! But my freedom merges with selfishness; my choosing influenced still by “elemental forces” of which I have almost no recognition. I long to live as one set free to be my true self. I seek to live as one who understands freedom is not license and comes with response-abilities. Yet I am still in need of instruction, still needing the kind of nurture that will help me

mature and flourish. Abba, as you have chosen and called me, help me learn again and learn anew the rhythms of the God-life: “Once more from the top. And a one and a two....”

### **Galatians 4:12-20**

I invite you to open your hearts to me, as you once did before when, because of my poor health, Imma opened the door for me to tell you the Good News Story about Jesus. May Jesus in me speak to Jesus in you that we may embrace in true fellowship. As you did before in neither despising nor disdaining me because I lacked robust health, do so now: Receive me as Imma’s messenger for Jesus’ sake.

What happened to your blessedness?<sup>39</sup> Have you forgotten how caring and compassionate you were? I have not! I bear witness you would have clawed your own eyes out<sup>40</sup> and given them to me had I asked for them! How did I become your enemy simply by telling you the truth?

Those among you now pursue you but to what purpose? For your good or their own? It is not for your good they seek to woo you to their ways. It is right and just to woo someone for a good purpose, as I seek to do both when I am with you and apart from you. Oh, my beloved, I am like a mother in the anguish of childbirth—longing for Jesus to be formed within you, to form and transform your true self so that you will reflect his image to the world. I wish I were there with you now and able to embrace you, for I just don’t understand why you are pursuing those who pursue you for their good not your good.

*I pursue  
mist and whimsy  
wondering why  
my hands fail to grasp  
what is not there.*

*Ready to embrace,  
incarnate Word that you are,  
seeking my good  
taking my hand  
you pursue.*

God, it’s me. I have known mentors like Paula—willing to embrace, ready to receive. I have experienced the blessing of mentors like Paula—unwilling to compromise for my sake, refusing to abandon the hard work

required of soul-shaping. Imma, make me like Paula in attitude and action—willing to pursue the good and ready to engage the work, unwilling to compromise and refusing to pursue the easy path.

### **Galatians 4:21-31**

I know I keep harping on this, but the story of Torah is a story of trust before obligation. You say you want to be under Torah's officious and oppressive tutelage? Fine—then listen to Torah!

Here is what Torah says. Abraham had two sons: one born the natural way by Hagar, his maidservant, and one born by Sarah, his beloved. The child born by Sarah was the child of Abba's promise to Abraham and Sarah.

These two births, and the manner in which they occurred, can be understood as allegory: Hagar and Sarah are two covenants—each a kind of sacred promise fulfilled. Hagar is the Torah given on Mount Sinai; she is the present Jerusalem needing instruction, in need of nurture, awaiting emancipation<sup>41</sup>—she and all her children. Sarah is the promise of what Jerusalem stands for—holy and sacred, our spiritual mother. The truth-teller Isaiah said this about those who trust in Abba's promise,

Rejoice, you of empty womb.  
Cry out, you of sterile seed.  
Your offspring will be too numerous to count.<sup>42</sup>

You, my beloved, are children of Abba's promise. Just as there were squabbles between Ishmael and Isaac, the sons of Hagar and Sarah, so it is today.<sup>43</sup> It has always been thus—our “natural” will likes to mock Abba's promise. What we can become of our own strength seeks to betray how Abba crafts our becoming. Our acceptance of remaining as slaves, children under tutelage,<sup>44</sup> belittles all notions of Abba's freedom. Yet Torah says,

Seek the promise!  
Stand on the promise!  
Freedom opens to the promise.  
Freedom delights in Abba's promise.

So, my beloved, remember this always: we are children of the promise, born of Sarah.

*The wind whispers among the pines,  
her gentle gusts swaying  
the sentinels that guard our patio.*

*The wind seems to remind:  
I have blown through this ancient forest.  
I am promise for ages to come.*

*The Wind inquires:  
Will you trust the future that comes from the past,  
or rely only on what you see before you?*

*The Wind invites:  
Allow me to sway you and  
you shall become a guardian of the Promise.*

God, it's me. My heart hurts for those who cannot endure waiting, who will not open themselves to that which is unseen. My heart longs to awaken them to the stillness and certainty of your life within us all. As one of Sarah's children, teach my heart to notice the ways you are crafting my character and fashioning within me a faith that endures. As one of Sarah's children, show me how to walk the path of your promised love.

### **Galatians 5:1-6**

Jesus claims us for freedom: the freedom to love and the freedom to serve, the freedom to sing praises and the freedom to seek peace, the freedom to bear each other's burdens in the work of justice and joy. Stand with Jesus in freedom rather than kneel before a master whose teachings<sup>45</sup> keep you enslaved.

Listen to me! It is I, Paula, who is pleading with you: If you think enduring an outward ritual will change your inward person, you are most deluded. Jesus is useful to affect such inward transformation but only if you turn to him. Again I say: Listen to me. If you entrust yourself to Torah and its rituals, such as circumcision, you are obligated to obey it completely—only perfect obedience is acceptable for Torah. Yet in seeking an outward obedience you neglect the support, nurture, and guidance of Jesus—his gift of transformation made idle and of no effect when ignored.<sup>46</sup>

In the Divine Spirit we wait and hope for Imma to craft us into the image of Jesus. Through the Divine Spirit we accompany Imma on this path toward our becoming. From the influence of the Divine Spirit upon us, we live into holy communion with Imma, holy community with one another, and a holy compassion for the world, which is our trust expressing itself through love and what is most important.

*Freedom is found  
in the pause  
between stimulus and response and  
in the pause  
to choose.*

*Freedom is not free  
for the pause is not inevitable  
stimulus and response like Cain and Abel  
never pausing of their own will  
only by a choice.*

*Freedom is a gift  
pausing to choose who I shall become  
quieting the noise  
finding in the pause the loving-kindness  
I choose to receive.*

God, it's me. The song has me pray, "Mold me and make me." And so I pray: Mold me into the image of Jesus; make me to walk his cruciform path. Mold me by your Spirit's inward transformation; make me to show my trust as love. Mold me as I accept Jesus' gift of agape<sup>47</sup> and shalom<sup>48</sup>; make me to share these gifts to all whom I meet. Mold us as we share in holy communion with you and holy community with one another; make us to offer a holy compassion to all.

### **Galatians 5:7-15**

You, my beloved, were doing so well: trusting Abba and expressing that trust as love; you were walking the Way of Jesus. Who tricked you into taking a "short-cut" that was actually a detour that is keeping you from dancing to God-rhythms? Such trickery is not from Abba, who invites you into the God-life. Remember: There is no such thing as a little corruption in one's heart.<sup>49</sup>

I believe in your ability to discern truth from sorrow and am confident you will decide to walk the path of Abba's freedom in Jesus. The ones leading you on your spiritual detour (whoever they may be) will answer to Abba. These folks claim I am now preaching circumcision. Fake news! If I am preaching circumcision, then why am I still being persecuted? Never! I refuse to abandon the foolishness of the Cross nor allow its scandal to go unnoticed, for it is precisely this scandal that draws attention to Abba's power at work in us—not what we do but what Imma does upon us is what matters most. As for

those leading you on your detour, and for all who are going along to get along, why stop at circumcision only? "In for a penny, in for a pound"—go all the way and become eunuchs!

My brothers and sisters, Abba called you to freedom: not for bondage but for benevolence, not for selfishness but for servanthood, not to feed your hungry lusts but to fulfill your calling to live with kindness toward all while walking humbly with Imma. All Torah is made whole and complete and perfect in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." To do otherwise is self-destructive and self-defeating. If you feast on your anger toward one another, the meal you consume is yourself.<sup>50</sup>

*The poet tells me to take the road less traveled—  
it will make all the difference.*

*The poet tells me to embrace the country roads—  
the heart of the nation is not found on the highways.*

*The poet tells me you shall know the Truth...  
and the Truth shall make you odd."<sup>51</sup>*

*The poet in me whispers, "Amen."*

God, it's me. When is a detour a distraction from your purpose in my life, and when is it your invitation to leave the "broad path that leads to destruction"? When is "going along to get along" sound wisdom, and when is it an invitation to lose my true self? How can I discern "news" that is a lie and a "story" that is truth? How can I discern the ways of the world from the Way of the Cross? Oh, Abba, teach me spiritual discernment! Open me to see your true North in every encounter: Love my neighbor. Love my neighbor. Love my neighbor. Teach me, Abba, to love.

### **Galatians 5:16-26**

Here is what I teach: open yourself to the Divine Spirit that she may teach you how to walk—not as those who fulfill distorted desires that change moment to moment but as those who realize Imma's eternal purposes for your true self.<sup>52</sup> The false self craves what cannot heal and does not make whole. The true self longs for that which brings *shalom* both to self and others. The false self is focused on its own sense of need: what it wants, when it wants it. The true self's vision lifts beyond personal need to embrace the

fullness of Imma's justice and joy. The true self is guided by the Divine Spirit, a *paidagogos* from above!

The actions and attitudes of the false self are plain to see: engrossed in porn and practicing misdirected sexual intimacy; abusing substances to forget or not care; elevating ideas and authorities to the level reserved only for Imma—even to the point of attempting to manipulate spiritual forces; lack of self-control that destroys not only oneself but others and community. I warn you: such self-absorption is contrary to living in Imma's kin-dom, and those immersed in these practices will never be capable of receiving the gift Imma offers—inclusion in her family and the gift of being made whole and complete.

But the Divine Spirit bears fruit that brings delight to the true self: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustworthiness, gentleness and self-control. Bearing this fruit cannot be directed by enforcement of rules and regulations. Indeed, anyone who belongs to Jesus the Anointed allows their false self to be crucified with him—all fiery feelings that gratify only the flesh being offered in sacrifice. We who belong to Jesus will allow the Divine Spirit to teach us to dance to God-rhythms—step by step, and a one, and a two. Therefore, let us not think too much of ourselves or too little of one another (or too much).

*Not a basket nor a bundle  
a single blossom that charms the whole person:  
the fruit of the Spirit.*

*No law directs its harvest  
its tasting a delight also to others:  
the fruit of the Spirit.*

*A meal fit for a king (prepared by the King)  
sumptuous banquet that creates the beloved community:  
the fruit of the Spirit.*

God, it's me. The life of the false self sounds horrible! Why do I so often make its fulfillment my quest? The life of the true self is the life I want to live—in my heart and mind and spirit; to be with and for others in pursuit of shalom; seeking to become your beloved community. Imma, plant the seed, nurture the growth, and harvest the fruit that leads me to my true self.

## Galatians 6:1-10

As the Divine Spirit influences us toward becoming our true self, so we are able to influence one another. Beloved, if one of y'all has walked far from Abba's path in pursuit of their false self, you who abide in the Spirit and in whom the Spirit abides, should guide that brother or sister back to Abba. But do so gently! With great care restore them to Abba. Always watch yourselves that your pride in helping another does not cause you also to stumble, for the Tempter awaits the opportunity to use our pride as a weapon in our own destruction.

Endure with one another the burdens of this life, for suffering increases in isolation and lessens in community. The Way of Jesus bears each other's burden even as we each carry our own load.<sup>58</sup> Those who think they don't need others, that they can endure the burdens of this life without need of others' support, are self-deluded.

All should examine their hearts and measure their actions: see that their actions and attitudes cohere, that there is integrity to their embrace, that each is met with inward approval and "Amen!" Each person must walk the path Abba has set for them—not another's path, not your friend's path or your spouse's path but your very own. Take comfort, though, in the knowledge that Imma sends among us teachers to instruct us along the Way—express gratitude and share generously with these guides.

Don't kid yourselves: Abba is no fool and is wise to the kind of seeds we plant through our actions and attitudes. The seed we plant determines the fruit we harvest. Planting seeds of the false self leads to brokenness and pain. Planting seeds of the true self leads to life made whole and complete.

So plant seeds today and tomorrow and the next! Plant seeds of compassion and seeds of justice, seeds of equity and seeds of equality, seeds of hope and longing and tenderness to one and all but especially to those in Abba's family. The planting season is long so we must persevere, but when the harvest comes, there will be rejoicing!

*I lay on the floor at midnight.  
My neighbor, a retired banker, says to me,  
"You're going to need to help me. I can't carry you."  
Together we struggle to his car.*

*My deacon looks upon me as I lay in the E.R.  
"You are one sick puppy," she says,  
as I sink into oblivion.  
It will be twelve days before I remember anything else.*

*My wife stands over me in the ICU.*

*"I bet you have some questions," she says.*

*I do—*

*the first of which is why there is a tube in my throat.*

*Over the course of days and weeks I discover*

*how the Body of Christ bore my burdens*

*and not only mine but my family's, too.*

*It took many months before I could carry my own load.<sup>54</sup>*

God, it's me. I thank you for the gift of beloved community: for those willing to receive a call at midnight and for those who lift up prayers; for those able to care for others who cannot care for themselves and for those who cheer others on in doing for themselves; for those who walk beside others for justice and peace and for those whose letters change a congressional vote. Abba, your beloved community is a gift I cherish. May I bear their burdens in service to a debt I can never repay.

### **Galatians 6:11-18**

I write this letter with my own hand rather than dictate it to a scribe, as is my custom (note the large letters!). And I tell you the truth: compelling you to submit to ritual observance for the ritual's sake only serves outward appearances. Those who seek this from you all desire only to look good in the court of public opinion. They do not observe all the rituals themselves nor obey all the laws contained in Torah. In asking you to try to walk in this way, they seek only to avoid criticism, scorn and persecution for trusting the Cross of Jesus to convey Imma's transforming power.

May I never exult in anything except the Cross of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Through Jesus' Cross, the broken values of corrupt culture are dead to me, and I am dead to them. The rituals you are being asked to practice mean nothing in themselves—the point is not the ritual but new creation. Becoming new creation is what matters, whether through practicing rituals or avoiding such practice. May Imma draw all y'all close in embrace as you become new creation, being those who wrestle with Imma and are given a new name.<sup>55</sup>

This is all I have to say for now. Please stop slinging accusations at me, for I have demonstrated my commitment to Jesus with my own body (and have the scars to prove it). The loving-kindness of Jesus the

Anointed, sovereign above Caesar, be with your spirits, my beloved. Amen.

*Light a candle in the darkness*

*(or allow yourself to immerse into the darkness).*

*Lift up your voice and sing*

*(or be still and silent and know the Lord is God).*

*Bow your head (or lift up your face)*

*Raise your hands (or bend your knees).*

*The ritual is a path to walk*

*(not the destination).*

God, it's me. Teach me the difference between dead ritual and living practice, between rote forms and the rhythms of faith, between "We've always done it this way" and fresh winds of the Spirit that lead to new creation. Open within me a willingness to play in the Spirit, to experiment with new forms of prayer, visual imagery, and holy habits grounded in ancient practices, yet always for the sake of a living faith. And while I play in the Spirit, let me respect others who play in a different manner, for you are shaping each of us in unique ways but also toward a common goal: make us new creation, Imma, bearing the image of Jesus into the world.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Bolz-Webber is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pastor, public theologian, and founder of House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver. To give you a sense of why I chose her as my muse, her website's homepage proclaims: "All are welcome: just don't be an asshole."

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word used is *apostoleos*, which literally means "sent one."

<sup>3</sup> "Galatia" in the ancient world, thus the title to this work: *The Letter to the Galatians*.

<sup>4</sup> My thanks to my colleague, the Rev. Dr. Mike Hegeman (hereafter referred to as "Hegeman"), from which I borrowed this variation of the commonly translated "grace." Dr. Hegeman used loving-kindness in his English translation of Galatians.

<sup>5</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus' authority as above Caesar's authority.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word used is *doulos*, which is often translated as "servant," but which means "slave."

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is "gathering" with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>8</sup> Ancient Syria and Cilicia.

<sup>9</sup> c.f. Acts 15—the Council of Jerusalem. The actual names of those who were companions in ministry were Barnabas and Titus. I considered calling Titus by a feminine name, "Trish," but the reference to Titus' circumcision later in the chapter seemed too great an interpretive hurdle, even given the freedom to paraphrase I afford myself.

<sup>10</sup> c.f. Acts 9—the Road to Damascus revelation.

<sup>11</sup> *Torah* is the Hebrew word that translates into English as Law. I chose to use Torah rather than Law in the paraphrase to remind readers that Paula's reference is not to a generalized ethical teaching but to the specific, covenantal obligations articulated in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>12</sup> c.f. Genesis 17:12.

<sup>13</sup> Customarily translated as James, Peter, and John by translators not seeking to evoke and experiment quite as openly as I am.

<sup>14</sup> This may be a specific reference to the Jerusalem offering discussed in 2 Corinthians 8-9 or a general reference to the ethical standards of Torah the early Christians (and today's Christians) affirmed.

<sup>15</sup> The text indicates merely that Peter ate with the Gentiles. However, in ancient Hebraic culture the social, ethical, and spiritual significance of sharing a meal was to convey respect and social intimacy, to which the paraphrase seeks to point.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek word *sunapago* is often translated as "led astray" but has the connotation of "being carried away." It seems to me, as

one who has observed family systems dynamics in churches for several decades, "led astray" is both accurate and utterly lacking the sense of force that occurs when powerful members inflict social conformity upon the church body.

<sup>17</sup> The NIV translation continues the passage in verse 2:15 and beyond, as if Paula continued to tell the story of how she confronted Peter. However, the tone of the language seems to shift between 2:11-14, (Paula is recounting what happened when she confronted Peter), and 2:15ff. (where she uses more theological argumentation to address the issue: what is the nature and foundation of Jesus' Gospel?). Therefore, I have chosen to break the passage here to separate the story of personal confrontation from the theological assessment of the issues. Both story and theological assessment are valuable modes of engaging theological conflict and keeping their distinctions clear is helpful.

<sup>18</sup> *Imago dei* is a Latin term theologians use that means image of God. Theologians use *imago dei* to refer to the truth that all humankind are created bearing God's image within them (c.f. Genesis 1:27).

<sup>19</sup> The Greek word *kataluo*, a variant of *luo*, can mean "destroy" or "loose," which I find presents an interesting choice for translators and preachers: Does one emphasize the active destruction of something (e.g. a personal habit or institutional dysfunction) or the passive releasing of the same? Some brokenness needs active engagement to overcome, while other brokenness needs to be let go so that one may move forward.

<sup>20</sup> Much Reformation theology thought in binary terms of "Law" versus "Gospel," as if the former was universally bad and to be contrasted with the latter which was good. However, much modern scholarship has demonstrated a more balanced and nuanced understanding of Paula's relationship with "the Law" by showing its cherished and beloved place in Jewish thought. Paula insisted that Law alone cannot create the path for Gentile salvation in the same way as Jesus' redemptive work, which, in Paula's view, extended God's covenant with Israel to include the Nations, too.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaiosune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaiosune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Paula's theology. For Paula, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior 😊.

<sup>22</sup> *Dunamis* is a Greek word meaning power, from which we get the English words dynamic and dynamite.

<sup>23</sup> c.f. Genesis 15:6.

<sup>24</sup> I am borrowing here from 1 John 4:7-12, "We love God because God first loved us."

<sup>25</sup> c.f. Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18.

<sup>26</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 27:26.

<sup>27</sup> c.f. Habakkuk 2:4. This verse is technically not a part of Torah (the first five books of the Bible) but part of the prophets.

<sup>28</sup> c.f. Leviticus 18:15.

<sup>29</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 21:23.

<sup>30</sup> I am tempted to say, “1<sup>st</sup> century,” but Paula would not have had cognizance of living in the 1<sup>st</sup> century; however, I refer to Paula’s cultural day in my paraphrase rather than our own.

<sup>31</sup> c.f. Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7.

<sup>32</sup> The Greek word used is *paidagogos*, which refers to a tutor or mentor for the children of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Hellenistic family. Technically, the *paidagogos* was responsible for moral and educational training. However, as Hegeman notes, the *paidagogos* “is the slave who takes the child back and forth to school, whose only function is to discipline the child, hemming the child in, serving an imprisoning, admonishing function.” Pavel’s association of Torah, as *paidagogos*, is to connect it to the function performed by a slave that treats the biological child as a slave while under his tutelage. The negative connotations of this imagery should not be missed: Pavel connects Torah to the work of a slave that enslaves.

<sup>33</sup> I do much interpretive exposition in this sentence and the next five, for the problematic verse that is translated as “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female but all are one in Christ Jesus.” (NIV) This verse is often used to promote such (good and kindly) sentiments as echoed in Dr. King’s *I Have a Dream* speech—“...not the color of their skin but the content of their character.” However, biblical scholars have discovered that, in a 1<sup>st</sup> century context, Paula’s point focuses less on the general equality of all humankind, (which is a good thing, no doubt), and more on specific equity between hierarchically related classes of people. That is, Paula’s spiritual insight that all are *imago dei*, created in Imma’s image, leads to an ethical insight that social, economic, and political equity is the only proper way of relating to one another in the kin-dom.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek word *dei* means “it is necessary, has a divinely appointed purpose.”

<sup>35</sup> Paula referred here to the Hellenistic (Greco-Roman) households familiar to the Galatians, which were patriarchal and hierarchical, with the father considered all-powerful and able to rule the house capriciously, if he so chose.

<sup>36</sup> The Greek refers to “father,” which is an example of the kind of patriarchal and hierarchical social custom of 1<sup>st</sup>-century life; the paraphrase is adapted for our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture.

<sup>37</sup> The Greek word *stoicheon* is difficult to translate and generally means something akin to philosophical first principles or scientific elementary rules. The NIV and NRSV translate as “elemental spiritual forces” and “elemental spirits” respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Paula referenced the cycle of Jewish festivals—“days and months and years”—not as bad in themselves but as problematic for Gentile believers to adopt Jewish rituals as obligatory.

<sup>39</sup> Note how Paula used blessedness to refer to the Galatians’ sense of being a blessing—of being helpful and healing to Paula—rather than as receivers of blessing.

<sup>40</sup> The paraphrase is more translation at this point—following Paula’s use of violent imagery. Per Hegeman, “Throughout the letter Paul used the language of disruptive violence. Elsewhere [s]he speaks of the violence of childbirth to talk about the apocalyptic happening that is the inbreaking reality of God.”

<sup>41</sup> I seek to walk a fine line between avoiding the creation of an either/or dichotomy in which “Law” is bad and “Gospel” is good yet also acknowledging the ferocious critique Paula sustains against Torah observance. Paula’s actual words reference “bondage” and “slavery” yet she clearly is connecting these things allegorically to what the Galatians were like when they were “children” in need of a *paidagogos*. Rather than write something like, “Jerusalem and all her children are in bondage,” with the pervasive and negative connotations this phrase implies, I chose to highlight the effects created by the reality of their ongoing enslavement. The context for this choice comes from scholarly consensus that Paula, as a first-century Jewish rabbi, would not have perceived Torah as bondage or an oppressive force. For 1<sup>st</sup> century (and 21<sup>st</sup> century) Jews, Torah was a joy and a delight to the soul. Paula’s critique of Torah was not that it is an insidious instrument of the evil one; after all, it was given by Imma! Rather Paula’s sustained critique of Torah is that it is *insufficient to liberate and powerless to restore wholeness and shalom to individuals, the community, and the creation*—its work is preparatory to the culmination found in Jesus through whom restoration comes.

<sup>42</sup> c.f. Isaiah 54:1. Note the Isaiah verse uses a poetic doublet and only refers to women. Knowing what we know about medical science, I changed the second half of the doublet to be more medically accurate.

<sup>43</sup> The rest of this paragraph is only loosely paraphrased. I accept Paula’s invitation to read the Hagar and Sarah narrative in Genesis 21 allegorically and allow that reading to find its way into the interpretive paraphrase, with emphasis on the “interpretive.”

<sup>44</sup> c.f. note 32.

<sup>45</sup> Paula referenced “the yoke of slavery.” In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, a rabbi’s teachings were known as the rabbi’s yoke—an image of attaching oneself to the rabbi’s teaching and allowing it to guide one’s path. Paula continues the image from the previous chapter to suggest Torah’s teaching leads to believers remaining in the state of childhood or bondage.

<sup>46</sup> The Greek word *katargeo* can mean “to make idle or to no effect” or can mean “to sever.” The NIV, in choosing the latter definition, suggests that one who seeks obedience to Torah (or any other system) is severed from relationship with Jesus, which seems extreme to me. I chose to convey a less vengeful depiction of the One who gave his life for the world: it is not that we lose all connection to Jesus, but that our connection is of no consequence when we seek after other (and lesser) things.

<sup>47</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phelos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a

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close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>48</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>49</sup> c.f. Leviticus 18:18.

<sup>50</sup> This is an allusion to Frederick Buechner's essay on anger in *The Alphabet of Grace*. (HarperOne: San Francisco, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> The first and third stanzas refer to lines by the poets Robert Frost and Flannery O'Connor.

<sup>52</sup> Throughout this passage, Paula used the Greek terms *sarx* (flesh) and *pneuma* (spirit), which in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Hellenistic culture conveyed a sense of "sin nature" and "spirit nature" or, as used in the paraphrase (and borrowed from Richard Rohr and others) "false self" and "true self." Paula's negative connotations about *sarx* (flesh) should not be understood to convey a physical asceticism nor degradation of the physical person, for the

Christian faith expresses itself incarnationally; that is, (in Spanish) *en carne*.

<sup>53</sup> Paula used two words, *bare* and *phrotion*, each of which convey the connotation of "weight" or "heaviness" and traditionally translated as burdens and load. The distinction between what constitutes a weighty burden versus a weighty load is subtle, but Paula distinguished between them thusly: The former requires support while the latter should be borne with personal accountability.

<sup>54</sup> On December 25, 2002, I came down with septicemia that led to multiple organ system failure. I would leave the hospital five weeks later after twelve days in a coma and several weeks of rehabilitation. I returned to work after Easter 2003, with my job still waiting. This poem is dedicated to the beloved community of First Presbyterian Church of Pueblo, Colorado, who lived the truth of Galatians 6:2.

<sup>55</sup> c.f. Genesis 32:28. Paula called those who are Abba's new creation the Israel of God, which translates literally as those who wrestle with God.

# PRAYING EPHESIANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING EPHESIANS

The ancient city of Ephesus was a marvel. A wealthy city, Ephesus contained two wonders of the ancient world: the majestically adorned Temple of Artemis and a library that rivaled the great library of Alexandria. The cultural message of these two wonders was that commerce with God could be bought or attained, if one just had enough money or understanding. To which Ephesians says, “Not so fast.”

Ephesians is one of my favorite letters. It says any commerce with God comes only as a free gift of grace. It conveys soaring rhetoric and grand notions of God’s plan and purpose. I love the way it talks about the unveiling of God’s mystery (seven times) to reveal God’s purpose (five times) for which we are predestined (twice). Ephesians is a Presbyterian’s dream.

Notice I have not said the author’s name yet. There is a bit of controversy about authorship (though only a bit). Most academic scholars argue for “Deutero-Pauline” authorship, which refers to the common, ancient practice of a student writing in the mentor’s name both to honor the mentor and give street cred to the current work.<sup>1</sup> (Did you know *Praying Ephesians* was written by Billy Graham?) Scholars note a shift from Paul’s early letters to his later writings, a shift from earthy, socio-political concerns being expressed in his theology and ethics to a perspective that tends toward the mystical or as having a more cosmic perspective (such as talking about mystery, predestination and God’s purpose unveiled). While I have no heartburn over the notion that an ancient student of Paul wrote in his name as a way of honoring his mentor, I remain open to the possibility that Paul’s perspective shifted as he aged, which is something that happens in human development, as I can attest as I approach 60. For *Praying Ephesians*, one practical effect of Paul’s shifting perspective is that I paraphrase “Jesus is Lord” as “Jesus, who is sovereign above the cosmos,” rather than “sovereign above Caesar” as in previous work in the *Praying Paul* series.

A second practical example of this shift is alluded to above: Paul’s verbiage is amplified. It is not enough that believers receive grace and a divine inheritance, in Ephesians it is “glorious grace” and a “glorious inheritance.” Our strength and power are now “mighty strength” and “incomparably great power.” The technical challenge I sought to overcome in *Praying Ephesians* is how to convey these superlatives without merely mining a thesaurus for adjectives and adverbs.

A challenge regards how to convey the words of Ephesians 5:21–6:9, which talks about husbands and wives, fathers and children, and slaves and masters. This passage presents a choice for all intrepid paraphraser: focus more on translation or interpretation? Leaning toward translation inevitably grounds the text in the provisional, oppressive hierarchies of 1<sup>st</sup> century culture. Leaning toward interpretation seeks to apply the principles of Gospel truth to 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. I have chosen to lean into interpretation.

While leaning into interpretation in the paraphrase of this passage, I maintain the structural unity Paul uses. Ephesians 5:21ff. is an example of a common literary form in Greek society, which scholars call “Household Ethics.” Every ethical teacher in 1<sup>st</sup> century society had their version of household ethics (like today every preacher has a sermon series on The Ten Commandments or every politician an economic policy platform). What is striking about Paul’s version is that while it conforms structurally to what a 1<sup>st</sup> century reader would expect (addressing the relationships for husband/wife, father/child, master/slave), it radically and shockingly overturns the oppressive, often brutal and capricious, hierarchies present in 1<sup>st</sup> century households. As such, Paul’s ethics were rejected by the prevailing culture. We fail to understand Paul well if we minimize how shocking his ethics sounded to the 1<sup>st</sup> century ear.

I refer to the Apostle by his English name in this introduction, but any reader who has read other work in the *Praying Paul* series knows my practice of seeking a more global and inclusive perspective by using variations of the name Paul from other cultures. I believe we open our spirits to the Spirit’s work when we are able let go of—and set aside—our glorious assumptions to discover the incomparably great insight that comes when hearing God’s Word with fresh ears. To wit, in the current work, the Apostle is named Pavel. The Apostle is Russian.

Does Pavel being Russian bother you? Inspire you? Intrigue you? Bore you? I ask you to notice such interior responses you may have, for they are the nexus points of the Spirit’s work within you: notice them, pray them to God, then allow what you hear to lead you deeper into God’s Mystery—the great Uncovering of God’s purposes and plan for the entire cosmos.

Brad Munroe  
June 2021

## Ephesians 1:1-14

Pavel, a sent one<sup>2</sup> of Jesus the Anointed, chosen and sent by the delight and determination of Abba. To Abba's chosen and set apart family along the shores of western Turkey<sup>3</sup> who trust in Jesus the Anointed and are trustworthy in their service: loving-kindness and *shalom*<sup>4</sup> to all y'all from Abba and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above the entire cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

May joy and gratitude overflow to Abba and Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above the entire cosmos, for how they have infused us with gifts too numerous to count—gifts beyond our requests and even beyond our imagination and always in Jesus. Abba and Jesus spoke<sup>6</sup> these gifts of the Divine Spirit into creation and into our lives. We are shaped by these gifts, being formed and transformed into those who are set apart<sup>7</sup> for Abba, who looks upon us as if we were without blemish.

In love, Abba claimed us and called us from before the beginning of time. In love, Abba set us upon the path that can lead to only one place: Abba's dinner table at the Feast. In love, Abba signed the adoption papers making us his legal heirs; the papers were signed in blood. All this was done according to Abba's delight and determination so that joy and gratitude may overflow because of his wondrous loving-kindness, which he showers upon us in, through and because of Jesus.

In Jesus, Abba restored us to right relationship<sup>8</sup> through Jesus' self-giving. In Jesus, Abba cleanses us and realigns us to become our true selves through the monsoons<sup>9</sup> of loving-kindness he showers upon us. In Jesus, Abba's winsome wisdom is on display to reveal insight and understanding about his delight and determination: that his eternal purpose has been accomplished, is being accomplished, and will be accomplished. And this is his purpose: to teach all heaven and earth to dance the God-rhythms together and teach the entire cosmos to sing the harmonies of the God-life.

In Jesus, our names were known before the beginning of time, and we were wooed to Abba's bosom. Cards with our names were placed around Abba's dinner table and our seats reserved for the Feast, which is what Abba's delight and determination purposed in the beginning and will accomplish. Count on it. We who are Jews were the first to be wooed, so that we could get the party started, singing songs of justice and joy as we placed our hope in Jesus. But y'all Gentiles have come along just as Abba planned and are joining the party now, too.

When you heard the Story of Jesus—the Good News that makes you whole and complete—you trusted the Story of what Abba was up to in and through Jesus. You received a heavenly tattoo—the Divine Spirit was placed within you, a foreshadowing of the fullness to come, a holy hint that you belong to Abba's family now and will one day join with all others who belong. On that Day, joy and gratitude will overflow as we dance the God-rhythms and sing the harmonies of the God-life.

*Best. Party. Ever.*

*Better than the best wedding reception.*

*Dancing all night, all day, all eternity.*

*What. A. Concert.*

*Better than the most beautiful symphony.*

*Singing songs I have never heard yet know by heart.*

*Plan. Prepare. Purpose.*

*Better than NASA can put together.*

*Discovering who we are and to whom we belong.*

God, it's me. My joy and gratitude overflow for all you have done in Jesus—calling and claiming, wooing and winning my heart. My joy and gratitude overflow for all you are doing in Jesus—teaching me to look beyond myself, beyond those whom I know and love, to look beyond and see the stranger who is my neighbor and the enemy who will become my friend. My joy and gratitude overflow for all you will do in Jesus—bringing to fullness the purpose of Creation, making us one with you, one with one another, and one with all whom you call to yourself. Abba, teach me to live today as I will be when your fullness is unveiled.

## Ephesians 1:15-23

Gratitude overshadowed me when I heard about your trust in Jesus the Anointed and your *agape*<sup>10</sup> for all of Imma's family. Gratitude continuously overshadows me still, as I remember you in my prayers to Imma.

I pray continuously to Imma, who is our Mother in splendor and in song and who sent Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above the cosmos. I pray she will gift to you all her Divine Spirit to make y'all wise: able to perceive truth and grow in experience<sup>11</sup> of Jesus. I pray the vision of your hearts may shine forth to remember and appreciate<sup>12</sup> the hope that burst forth within all y'all when Imma called

you to herself. I pray that as you all remember and appreciate Imma's vast and numerous gifts to y'all as her beloved children, who are set apart for her service, you each will display her excellence and will experience *dunamis*<sup>13</sup> beyond your own abilities through trusting her.

The *dunamis* I pray for you all is the same energy to make whole and complete that was at work when Imma raised Jesus from death to life. It is the same *dunamis* Imma unleashed when she gave Jesus the seat of honor at her right hand, seating him in the throne room of the highest heaven, above all earthly influence, above all human authority, above any claim or obligation, above all the famous or infamous, above anything or anyone today, tomorrow and into eternity.

Imma propped up Jesus' feet using all things in the entire cosmos as a footstool—to proclaim his authority to all heaven and earth and to pronounce that he is the origin and fulfillment of those gathered<sup>14</sup> in his name, who are called his Body. This Body finds its wholeness as Jesus fills up every inch of its being; every thought and every action, every song and all service, every breath and heartbeat until Jesus is all and Jesus is all in all.

*God is great, God is good,  
let us thank him for our food.*

*"Be still and know that I am God," says Imma.  
"In the silence I will reveal myself to you  
and you shall be overshadowed with awe."*

*Bless all we know and all we love  
with health and happiness and no harm.*

*I pray the vision of your hearts may shine forth  
to remember and appreciate the hope  
that burst forth within you when Imma called.*

*Ah, I've said my prayers for the day  
I've done my duty to Imma.*

*The dunamis I pray for you is the same energy  
to make whole and complete that was at work  
when Imma raised Jesus from death to life.*

God, it's me. I am chagrined as I read about Pavel's prayer life. I do not pray like this for my flock nor for my family and friends. My prayers lack the depth of thought and the devotion to a larger purpose—your purpose. Teach me, Imma, how to pray! Nudge me to

give more of my heart and mind to you in prayer. Nurture within me a longing to share my deepest self with you—my brokenness and my blessedness—that the same energy you unleashed in resurrection may be unleashed in my service to your Name.

## **Ephesians 2:1-10**

All y'all were once dead, having fallen away from Abba and having aimed your life at the wrong target. Y'all once sauntered, then jogged, and then sprinted head long down the wrong path, conforming yourselves to the pattern of the one whose rule crushes and whose way is to destroy, and who still works among the apathetic.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, all of us walked this path at some point in our lives, seeking to gratify our false self with its misguided purposes and tormented logic. The inevitable end of this path is a cliff that overlooks the Abyss.

But now we walk the path Abba set us upon. Abba's love is abundant in mercy, forgiving us and releasing us not just to walk but to dance the God-rhythms. Abba's love overflows in mercy making us able to live the God-life even though we were once dead, having fallen away from Abba, the source of life. Abba saved us through loving-kindness received as a gift we cannot earn on our own but only welcome with gratitude.

Abba raised us up with Jesus and seated us with him (spiritually and mystically) in the highest heaven. Abba did this and does this so that his renown as the Ultimate Lover of All may be known today, tomorrow and into eternity—with soaring ballads sung about his loving-kindness on display in the justice and humility of Jesus.

This loving-kindness is the source of our wholeness and healing, received through trusting Abba, received as a gift we cannot earn on our own but only welcome with gratitude. There can be no boasting or bragging from those who possess Abba's loving-kindness: only rejoicing and giving thanks. For what we are and who we are is not something we create but something we receive.

Our true selves are handcrafted by Abba as works of art. Abba crafts our true selves for a purpose: to perform good works, to practice new creation, to participate alongside Jesus the Anointed in the work of restoring heaven and earth. All this was envisioned by Abba from before the beginning of time and will be creation's fulfillment. All this Abba prepared at the same time our names were placed around his dinner table and our seats reserved for the Feast.

*Life is a gift.*

*We know this (at some level).*

*We know this (at least in abstract form).*

*Life is a gift.*

*Do we know this at the soul level?*

*Do we know this embodied and incarnate in Jesus?*

*I am a gift.*

*For the work of rejoicing and giving thanks.*

*For the work of new creation.*

*I am a gift:*

*crafted by the hands of a lover so tender,*

*I discover my true self as if for the first time.*

God, it's me. My heart flutters at the idea of your love—choosing me before the beginning of time and embracing me after the end of all things. My heart rejoices at the reality of your love—received as a gift I cannot earn, only welcome with gratitude. My heart longs to respond to your love—becoming art that evokes praise for your Name, being crafted into the image of Jesus for the sake of new creation. Amen and Amen!

## **Ephesians 2:11-22**

We belong to Imma and are brought into her family as we welcome her gift of loving-kindness. Because we are brought into her family to participate with Jesus in Imma's work of new creation,<sup>16</sup> remember who you are. Remember that you once were born in the wrong country and called "dirty" by those privileged to be born into prosperity and power, which they themselves had received as a gift rather than something they had built themselves. Remember that you once were distant from Jesus, estranged from citizenship as Imma's chosen, outsiders excluded from the sacred promises, without hope, as if Imma never lived. Now remember y'all belong to Imma, too. Remember all y'all are part of her family, also. Remember she personally crafted you to participate with Jesus in her work of new creation. Remember these things and trust: through Jesus' self-giving love Imma embraces you to her bosom.

Jesus himself is our peace—embodying Imma's desire for *shalom* in his own person. Jesus reconciles the broken families and tribes and reunites the diverse races

and nations. Jesus destroys the enmity between us and tears down the walls that divide us—one human from another—until we are merely one human family.

Jesus consummated and fulfilled in his own person the totality of Torah when he took up his Cross. Taking the full wrath of evil within himself (and yet remaining steadfast in loving all), Jesus broke evil's ability to create unending hostility.

Jesus proclaimed Imma's *shalom* to those near and far, to insiders and outsiders, to citizens and foreigners, to those who have always known they belong and to those for whom belonging was a revelation and a surprise. Now, through Jesus, we all have direct, unmediated access to Imma in the Divine Spirit. Imma is always only a prayer away, and that goes for all y'all as much as it does for me.

Therefore, remember this, too: you all are no longer foreigners but citizens, no longer strangers but siblings in Imma's family. You come from an honored lineage: truth-tellers and sent ones, with Jesus the Anointed seated at the head of the table. A place has been reserved in your name for the Feast over which Jesus presides.

In Jesus the household becomes a home and the home becomes a living Temple—the place from which Imma's presence radiates into the world. In Jesus you all, also, are becoming a part of this Temple—the place where Imma's presence lives in Spirit.

*The scar extends as far as my eyes can see.*

*Rising above the desert floor,*

*it's rusted metal coarse like sandpaper.*

*The scar's purpose is division,*

*to keep me and thee from becoming  
us.*

*The scar cannot keep me from knowing your name.*

*Between the rusted lattice I call to you:  
brother, sister, beloved.*

*Jesus, you came to heal such scars,*

*and the enmity that inflicts them  
upon land and community.*

*Jesus, you claim to tear down*

*"the dividing wall of hostility."*

*What will you do about the dividing walls of fear?*

God, it's me. So. Much. Hate. Imma, I feel the hostility in the marrow of my soul. It is pervasive. And destructive. I fear, also, that I may contribute to it. Though I always feel justified in doing the things I do, am I? Though I always feel justified in saying the things I say, am I? Imma, teach me when to remain silent and when to speak. Help me to discern when to act and when to refrain from action. Embolden within me the conviction that the right time to pray for the healing of our churches and culture is...always.

### **Ephesians 3:1-13**

So I want to tell you why I, Pavel, imprisoned because of my service to Jesus the Anointed on your behalf...let me start again. Here is what I mean to say....<sup>17</sup>

You have heard about how Abba chose me as house steward over the home, at least as it concerns your care and well-being<sup>18</sup> as Gentiles. I was infused with Abba's loving-kindness so that I might steward the great Uncovering, about which I have written before. That is, I was allowed to perceive the wisdom of the great Uncovering brought about through Jesus. This Uncovering was neither known nor imagined by previous generations but unveiled to truth-tellers and sent ones by the Divine Spirit.

And here is the great Uncovering: you all belong to Abba, too. Not just some of you, all of you—all y'all! Through the Good News of Jesus, you all have become a part of Abba's family. All y'all are knit together with those from Israel to become members of one Body. Together we all share in Abba's promise through Jesus the Anointed.

I became a servant of the Good News of Jesus when Abba overshadowed me with his loving-kindness—a gift I received and vocation I welcomed with rejoicing. I am the least and last one who should be doing this job, but Abba's loving-kindness makes me able. I speak clearly of the incomprehensible. I make plain the unfathomable. I take what was hidden to previous generations and uncover it. Abba, who created all things, hid this one thing, until now: all humankind is one.

Abba's intention was that, beginning with this present era, the gathering of his people—both Jews and Gentiles as one—will express the wisdom of Abba's diverse and wondrous creation. Abba's intention was for the gathering, who are the Body of Jesus on earth, to proclaim to all heaven the beauty of Abba's creation: languages coming together to sing a unified praise, peoples coming

together to share a common purpose, joy erupting as diverse cultures dance the God-rhythms as one.

This was Abba's intention, and, in Abba, intention means purpose and purpose is always fulfilled. Abba's purpose in the great Uncovering was accomplished in, through, and by Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above the entire cosmos. In Jesus and through trust in him, we are given access—connected straight to Abba—where we can speak bluntly<sup>19</sup> if we must and with confidence the conversation will go well. With this understanding before you that Imma called me to join her in this work of new creation, don't be discouraged—not even dismayed—that I suffer. It goes with the job and results in your shining Imma's light into the world.

*I imagine a movie trailer:*

*blurred images becoming ever clearer,  
music swelling to a crescendo—"The Great Uncovering!"  
(Coming soon to a theater near you.)*

*Reality intervenes:*

*The family next door teaches me how to say hello.  
Pentecost shows up in the pew next to me—  
as I share a hymnal with those not of my own culture.*

*The great Uncovering is not so much great, as it is good—  
good people uncovering Abba's good purpose,  
hearts opening wide to one another and to "The Other."  
(Coming soon to a church near you.?)*

God, it's me. I actually wonder about your timing. Why keep hidden—the divine Mystery of the ages—that we are all one, human family? Is this really a surprise? But then I watch the news. Yes, that we are all one human family is news to many folks—and unwelcome news at that. And when I look within (rather than at others), I see a life surrounded by others who look and talk and think just as I do. I confess, Abba, I, too, need lessons in the wonder of your diverse and beautiful creation. So if you must start anew the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion, may it begin with me, for evidently I still need to learn.

### **Ephesians 3:14-21**

Because I have been called to join Imma's work of new creation, I kneel before her—she is the One who bestows upon us our true names and does this for every

family in heaven and earth. I pray that Imma's abundance will make y'all reflect the light of her love. I pray Imma's abundance will confirm<sup>20</sup> within you that it is her *dunamis* at work within you. I pray Imma's Divine Spirit will inspire you to remember she is crafting you into the new humanity.<sup>21</sup> This new humanity is the place where Jesus dwells<sup>22</sup> in your hearts as you trust him—the very presence of the One who is sovereign above the entire cosmos abiding in you all, making his home within your hearts.

I pray also that, having been planted deep into the soil of Imma's fertile love, with your root systems interlacing with one another's and with all of Imma's family, y'all will be able<sup>23</sup> to perceive, comprehend, appreciate, and embrace the heights and the depths, the horizons and the breadth of Jesus' *agape*. I pray you will know and understand, will experience and indwell, the fullness of this wondrous love.

Now to she who is able to overflow our knowledge and expand our imagination, to she who is at work within each of us and all of us together, to her be songs of adoration and rejoicing in the gathering. May our songs resound in Jesus the Anointed throughout all generations, to every corner of the earth, today, tomorrow, and into eternity! Amen.

*Doxology*  
*praise eternal*  
*heart songs overflowing*  
*discovering our true name*  
*home*

God, it's me. When I became a Christian at the age of 17, I thought my heart would explode: so much love, given as a gift. As amazing as that "Summer of Grace" was, I now realize I was just beginning a journey, having only taken baby steps along the way. Imma, from time to time I think I understand the depth of your love—unlock the vault of my heart and make it open to your Spirit. From time to time I believe I have "this God thing" figured out—shake me from my slumber that I may awaken to your Spirit. From time to time I am convinced I understand more than others—even as I pray this, it sounds silly. Imma, may you uncover for me the heights and the depths, the horizons and breadth of your love, found in Jesus, discerned in your Spirit, to be shared with all. Amen and amen.

## Ephesians 4:1-6

Because<sup>24</sup> Abba is able—able and willing—to bless you and to keep you and to make his face to shine upon you unto transformation into new creation, do this: live a life that honors Abba's invitation that is a summons—you have been called.<sup>25</sup> As one bound by chains in a Roman prison, I plead with you to walk freely in humility of mind and gentleness of spirit. Bear each other's suffering with patience and enfold each other with love. Work with energy, intelligence, imagination and love to promote the peace, unity and purity of the Body.<sup>26</sup>

There is one Body and one Spirit, and y'all were invited—indeed, summoned—to one hope when Abba wooed you. This hope, our hope, is built upon the foundation of a singular sovereign—Jesus the Anointed—a common trust, and the same ritual, baptism, that seals us all in the bonds of Abba's sacred promises and summons us into his family forever. This baptismal hope points toward the truth that Abba is One and the Father of all, all, all, all<sup>27</sup> people in heaven and on earth.

*Human unity is fleeting*  
*a June fog that burns off in the afternoon*  
*a glimpse of the sun that does not persist.*

*Human unity is fleeting*  
*for we seek it in agreement*  
*for we share it only until the next controversy.*

*Sacred unity is forever*  
*the wind that blows through the pines*  
*the rain that falls on the just and unjust alike.*

*Sacred unity is forever—*  
*rooted in a shared invitation*  
*grounded in a common summons.*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of your peace. Make me able to walk a life that honors you. Make me willing to walk a life that loves as you love: with humility and gentleness, with patience that bears another's burdens. Abba, is this the path to peace? Is this the Way out of our perpetual feuding? If so, I say again: Make me an instrument of your peace!

## Ephesians 4:7-16

Each of us was overshadowed with loving-kindness and received a portion of the gift shared in Jesus the Anointed. You know the saying:

He rose up to imprison the prison;  
he showered gifts upon his people.

When it says, “He rose up,” what can it mean except that he had first descended into the abyss of the dead? Jesus who descended and rose again ascended into the highest heaven—going higher and farther, reaching into every corner of the universe, until all things were brought into the womb of new creation.

This same Jesus showers gifts upon the Body: gifts for sent ones, truth-tellers, and Good News storytellers; gifts for shepherds and instructors, too. These gifts are given to accomplish the work for which the Body has been invited and summoned. Each gift given nurtures the Body of Jesus until all are unified in a common trust and until all share a collective recognition of Jesus as Imma’s son. No one is left behind. All gifts given develop the Body of Jesus so that each one of us individually and all of us together will grow into maturity in Jesus, becoming our truest selves and most faithful reflection of him.

Becoming our truest selves is urgent work! The world needs us to be mature, fully grown adults rather than like children who scamper about hither and yon with the attention span of a dog who sniffs a squirrel. Children listen to the voice that cajoles, but we must heed the voice of the Good Shepherd.<sup>28</sup> Children are easily led astray, but we must remain steadfast in walking the Way of Jesus. Children are prey for predators in this world, but we must be guardians of the God-life.

We grow in maturity as we speak the truth to one another in love—no “playing nice” for the sake of not hurting each other’s feelings but respecting each other enough to be honest yet kind. We grow in maturity in thought, word, and deed so that we might reflect the mind of Jesus. We grow in maturity in body and soul so that we might reflect the heart of Jesus. We grow in maturity because Jesus is the origin and destination of our becoming. From Jesus the whole Body is woven together, each cell an expression of a sacred DNA that, when combined into a single community, learns the fullness of *agape*.

*Health is all the rage.*

*Eating well and exercise a barometer of goodness.*

*Nutri-system and CBD the new sacraments.*

*The body a temple before which we bow.*

*Health in the God-life seems sappy.*

*Speaking truth with kindness a form of nostalgia.*

*Using our gifts to serve community mere sentimentality.*

*Yet the Body is the Temple of the Living God!*

God, it’s me. I thank you for sending your servants to tell me the Good News of Jesus. I thank you for sending pastors to guide me in the God-rhythms. I thank you for sending teachers to instruct me about the God-life. Imma, I pray that I may use my gifts as faithfully as they used their gifts—that together we might express your gifts of *agape* and *shalom* in the world. Today, how would you like me to use my gifts? To whom are you sending me?

## Ephesians 4:17-32

Here is what I insist you avoid (and this, for me, is a core spiritual conviction): don’t live like those immersed in the broken cultures of Greece and Rome and, indeed, all over the world. Such cultures lead people to chase every wind of whim, their minds in constant search for diversion without direction. Such cultures cause their citizens to look directly into the sun, blinding them to the God-life and causing them to stumble, making them unable to dance the God-rhythms. Instead, their hearts become like marble—perfect for making statues but not for crafting our true self. Such people surrender their wills to deception and their bodies to depravity; violently they reject that which builds dignity and supports integrity. This is not the Way of Jesus!

You know and have been taught the truth—that the Way of Jesus lives ever deeper into Abba’s new creation. You know and have been taught to let go of your false self (the “you” that clings to the dying world), for walking in that way destroys and deceives, corrupting our deepest desires. Instead, you know and have been taught to clothe yourselves with right relationships (with Abba and with all) and to seek a lifestyle that wears devotion with direction like a new outfit.

So, as you are letting go of your false self (and all that goes along with it) begin practicing the ways of your true self with those around you, for we are all part of the same human family.

When anger knocks on your door, don't invite it in and serve it tea. When the Accuser asks to visit for dinner, don't serve him a feast.

Thieves, stop it, just stop. Instead of seeking the easy way forward set your hands to that which brings joyous fatigue—hard work done well, in service to others, especially to those in need.

And all y'all stop with the constant demeaning of one another! You have heard it said, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Well, I say: Speak kindness into the world. Speak with respect to one another—with neither bitterness nor belligerence, with neither rage nor wrath, with neither slander nor smear of any kind, which only causes sorrow for Abba's Divine Spirit. More light, less heat<sup>29</sup> is a good rule of thumb when speaking to each other. The Divine Spirit has tattooed your soul with Abba's family crest—why cause her grief? Speak in ways that nurture wholeness in the Body. Reflect Abba's tender heart toward all humanity in the ways you speak to one another. Express the divine mercy that has already forgiven you in Jesus and will lead you to forgive one another.

*The "F" word  
is not often spoken in church,  
which is a shame, really,  
because it sure would spice things up,  
and don't we need some zest and zing in our churches?  
So the next time the Spirit whispers to your heart,  
go ahead and let loose,  
say it out loud,  
for everyone to hear:  
I forgive you.*

God, it's me. I often reject the values of our broken culture: with smug self-righteousness I decry the deceit and depravity all around me. Yet I confess I too often give vent to my anger (though don't usually invite Satan to dine with me and my family). I routinely seek work that serves me rather than others. Too frequently my tongue is a sword that slashes rather than a balm that heals. I seldom forgive. Abba, I guess I'm something of a mess. I confess (how can I not confess given how obvious it is) that sometimes I want to be a part of the broken culture: when it suits me, when it meets my needs, when it fills my desires. Abba, in your mercy forgive, by your mercy restore, for your mercy's sake renew. Amen and amen.

## Ephesians 5:1-20

Imitate Abba, for you are beloved children. Dive deep into the waters of Jesus' *agape*—smell the fresh aroma of his self-giving, the fragrance of his surrender that leads to our freedom.

As for a willingness to degrade yourself or another, a willingness to abuse your advantage over another, or a desire to fill an insatiable longing for "more, more, more,"<sup>30</sup> such things do not belong among those who belong to Abba. Neither does silly, baseless, and bawdy joking belong among you but rather thanksgiving—may your speech be an expression of *eucharist*,<sup>31</sup> giving thanks to Jesus in all things. Be assured that those who denigrate and degrade others, or abuse and oppress them, cannot frolic in the kin-dom of Jesus and Abba. How can they participate in kin-dom living when their hearts are busy chasing after things that will not be found there?

Don't kid yourselves and don't allow yourselves to be fooled. Empty words lead to apathy<sup>32</sup>—don't subscribe to their podcast. You once were night but now are light, for you abide in Abba. Live as children of light, reflecting the divine rays of all that is virtuous and just and seeks truth. Bear the fruit of Abba's light for the sake of the world, but do not indulge the fruit of darkness, whose bite tastes sweet upon the tongue but whose after taste is bitterness and strife. Rather than partake of darkness, shine light into dark corners, for all darkness will be exposed to light and made visible. Thus, it is written by the truth-teller Isaiah,

Wake-up, sleepy head!  
Rise and shine (from death to living),  
Jesus shines upon you!<sup>33</sup>

Notice the path upon which Abba's light shines and walk there. Become aware of the shadows, but rather than seek only to avoid them, notice the source of the light that creates them: find the light and follow it rather than walk in shadows. Do this and you will be wise, for the Divine Spirit will make you able to perceive Abba's promised new creation.

Don't get all liquored up, for it leads to sloppy speech and poor choices. Instead, drink freely of the Spirit's joy as you sing songs ancient and modern, songs that mend the heart and evoke wonder, songs that express *eucharist* and lead you all to dance to the God-rhythms of the God-life.

*Light is best at dawn or dusk.  
Contrasting the darkness that has been or is coming,  
the colors appear crisp and sharp—inviting.*

*Sunrise and sunset are invitation.  
To awaken or to rest but always to affirm:  
I am a child of Light.*

God, it's me. I am no prude and am thankful you do not require prudish behaviors. Scrupulous? Yes. Compassionate and just? Yes. Honoring of self and others? Yes. Affirming each one's dignity? Yes. Upholding integrity? Yes. But prudish? No. And yet, Abba, I acknowledge that my sense of decorum may be different (and a bit looser) than others. Help me to respect their boundaries and support them as they seek to live in your light. Remind me—again and again—of the ancient, Christian aphorism: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

#### **Ephesians 5:21 - 6:9<sup>34</sup>**

Respect each other as an expression of your love for Jesus. When each of us empties ourselves of ego, all of us may be filled with Jesus' love—enough to share with one another. Here is what mutual respect looks like in the household of faith.

In married life, respect each other. Listen openly and speak kindly. Live as those in mutual, self-surrender that serves the other's best and true self. This doesn't mean just "doing what the other wants," for marriage was not created to serve the voracious appetite of the false self. Rather, marriage that expresses reverence for Jesus always desires wholeness, healing and holiness for one another.

Any marriage in which each spouse is holding back a part of themselves or seeking "50-50" is doomed to fail. Only marriages in which each spouse is surrendering all of themselves to each other—100% and 100%—will reflect the full blessedness of Imma's love. Each spouse should love the other as Jesus loved the gathering, which is his Body. Jesus desired the gathering to be whole and complete, filled with loved and always loving, blessed to be a blessing; therefore, Jesus surrendered himself for the Body's sake. In the same way, live with abandon toward one another.

I am speaking of marriage yet also of Jesus and the Body. As Torah says,

Leaving one's own home and joining with another,  
two become one—  
something greater and more blessed.<sup>35</sup>

As Jesus loved the Body—and who does not love and want their body to be cared for and nurtured well—so also you should love, care for and nurture one another.

In parent-child relationships, respect each other. Children should obey their parents and also honor them in the manner of their obedience. Don't just do something because you have to do it. Accept that your parents seek your healthy growth as children who belong first to Imma and then to the parents. The commandment to honor one's parents comes with a promise: that you may grow and prosper and live a long, blessed life!

Parents, do not provoke your children to anger or exasperation. Though you are bigger and stronger, do not use your strength to abuse or intimidate. Rather guide your children through love and nurture, through setting standards and boundaries, through mentoring and helping them to be poured into the mold reserved for Imma's beloved children.

Workers and employers should respect each other. Workers should serve the common good and seek the success of one's employer. Do it not just to keep your job but because doing a job well honors Jesus and expresses one's integrity. Do your job with zest and commitment, as if you are serving Imma herself in your daily life. Imma will see your heart and be pleased.

Employers should not abuse their position of authority. You need to make tough decisions—fine, but make them with equity and fairness for all. You may have the ability to lord over your workers but must resist any such temptation. Instead treat each person with respect, as if they are your own family, for Imma also shows no partiality. Indeed, Imma is both your Sovereign and theirs.

*Learned through osmosis  
being husband or wife, father or mother, worker, too.*

*Learning through watching  
our parents molding us into their image.*

*Learned as intention  
becoming an instrument of respect.*

*Learning through instruction  
the Way of Jesus repouring the mold.*

God, it's me. Make me better—a more faithful partner, a more devoted parent, a wiser supervisor. Make me able to reflect Imma's love to others and so show reverence to Imma and Jesus, who model for us what this all looks like. Make me like Jesus—in all ways, at all times, to all people. May the mountains of hierarchies our culture has built be brought low and the valleys of inequality we have allowed to exist be made level, that we might all walk together the path of justice and joy.

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

Moving forward, stand<sup>36</sup> firm in Abba—allow him to strengthen your true self. Clothe yourselves with Abba's armor so that you will remain standing when the forces of avarice, betrayal and corruption—the ABC's of the Accuser—knock on your door. When that moment comes, there is sure to be a brawl.

These forces are wily and cunning, their methods deceptive and shrewd, their intentions unyielding to any reason. You will want to be ready, for the struggle with them is not like getting into a locker room scuffle. They are accustomed to throwing punches both in bars and convents, in dark alleys at midnight and the county square at high noon, both in the boardroom and the bedroom. They don't care—ever—where they bring the brawl.

Sometimes they use your own thoughts or feelings against you. Other times they use those closest to you to convince you to question Abba's purpose and presence in your life. Be ready, for you must stand against them.

Again I say, clothe yourselves with Abba's armor—all of it! Abba's armor is like what you see a Roman centurion wear, only it is designed to defend against the ABC's of the Accuser and make you able to stand firm in Abba. Stand, therefore, with truth holding up your trousers, justice adorning your chest, and wearing shoes that make you swift to speak of Jesus' *shalom*. Stand with trust in one hand and Abba's Word in the other. Trust is like a fire hose being used to put out a match, and Abba's Word slices through all the bull of the Accuser like a sharp sword through butter. And on your head, wear Abba's specially designed (just for you) ball cap—the one that says, "Abba makes me great."

Finally, if you want to be the last one standing after an epic brawl with the forces, pray. Pray in the Divine Spirit and through the Divine Spirit. Pray in the morning, the evening and throughout the day. Pray with petitions and with praise. Persevere in your prayers—never giving them

up even if you encounter a Dark Night of the Soul—especially persevere when that night comes.

And while you are praying, I ask all ya'll to pray for me. Pray that I will be bold to speak the Good News of Abba's great Uncovering—the message that in Jesus all nations are one, all humankind created *imago dei*,<sup>37</sup> and all people must share in dignity, equity, and inclusion as Abba's beloved children. It is this message, and not just some benign religious talk, that has me in a Roman prison.<sup>38</sup> Pray that even in prison I would be free to proclaim the Good News that no force of evil can keep locked away.

*Spiritual battle sounds overwrought or creepy  
a "B" movie with CGI and special effects  
laughable and easy to dismiss.*

*Spiritual battle can be an excuse  
for shaming or rejecting or holding oneself above another  
the ego driven exclusion by the so-called "good people."*

*Spiritual battle, in reality, is fought in whispers  
the inner voice leading astray, distorting reality  
casting doubt, weakening conviction, shattering assurance.*

*Spiritual battle is no movie nor an excuse to be an ass  
but serious struggle—even if unseen to the eye—  
the heart knows the battle must be won.*

God, it's me. I know of those who deny the existence of evil, saying it's just human choice or natural circumstance. I suspect otherwise. My heart warns me not to trust certain words, spoken sotto voce, whose effect is to cast doubt on your justice and joy. My heart teaches me to discern these whispers from the still, small voice of your Spirit, which affirms what is good and just and true. Perhaps it is too much to say my heart is a battle ground. Perhaps my experience is explained by psychology or neuroscience. All I know—and in this I find assurance and hope—is that when I trust you, the Voice I need to hear leads me into life.

### **Ephesians 6:21-24**

There is much to tell you about how I am doing—too much for this letter. I am sending Tychicus, a dear brother and Imma's trustworthy servant, to tell you how I am doing and to encourage your hearts.

*Shalom* to all! And my *agape*, too, which I trust begins and ends with Imma—God of all the cosmos—and Jesus the Anointed—sovereign above the entire cosmos. May all y'all who possess an enduring love of Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above the cosmos, be filled with loving-kindness!

*Faith isn't all about  
grand theological ideas and weighty matters of ethics.  
Simple greetings,  
news from a friend,  
a visit:  
all convey joy in believing.  
Gospel hospitality is grand and weighty, too.*

God, it's me. I am chagrined by Pavel's words, for too easily am I distracted by grand and weighty matters and forget the simple joy of community. Yet if the Covacalypse has taught me anything, it is the importance of community: the sharing of joys and concerns just go better with a hug or a smile, with applause or a tear. The coffee tastes better, too. Imma, teach me to slow down enough that I may live in the moment of another's joy, another's concern, and our life together.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Critics of the notion of Deutero-Pauline authorship accuse such authors of committing forgeries, which lacks comprehension of ancient, literary practices. There is a difference between a forgery and writing something to honor a mentor.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word *apostoleos* means “sent”; ergo, “apostles” are literally “sent ones.”

<sup>3</sup> aka, Ephesus, thus the title of the letter is *Ephesians*.

<sup>4</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>5</sup> See the introduction for a note on the use of this phrase.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word Pavel used is ordinarily translated as “blessing” or “blessed”—the word is *eulogesis* from which we get the English “eulogy,” literally a “good word.” Pavel conformed to all Hebraic thought that God spoke the creation into being and here speaks blessing into our lives.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as holy and literally means set apart—both set apart from and set apart for.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaioisune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaioisune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Pablo’s theology. For Pavel, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior 😊.

<sup>9</sup> Living in Arizona, the monsoon rains of summer are experienced as a gift.

<sup>10</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others.

<sup>11</sup> The Greek word used is *epignosis*, a variant of *gnosis* from which we get the English “knowledge.” However, *epignosis* conveys the nuance of “experiential” or “relational” knowledge and not just knowledge in the abstract.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek word used is *eidenai*, which can be translated as “know” but also conveys the connotation of “remember” or “appreciate.” I find it interesting that English Bibles translate both *epignosis* and *eidenai* as know and yet the Greek allows for very different connotations with much richer nuances than often associated with the word tree of know or knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> *Dunamis* is the Greek word for power, from which we get the English words dynamite and dynamic.

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>15</sup> What the NIV translates as “disobedient” is the Greek word *apatheios*, which can also mean “apathetic.”

<sup>16</sup> Pavel’s use of the Greek word *gar*, usually translated as “therefore,” functions as a summary of what precedes it, which is conveyed here in the beginning of this passage.

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 3:1 begins with an incomplete thought and odd, partial sentence. This is an excellent example of the ancient practice of “writers” dictating a letter to a scribe. As a professional public speaker, I have often started a thought only to get sidetracked and have to refocus my thoughts—all while “thinking out loud.”

<sup>18</sup> The Greek word *oikonomian* refers to the household manager. Anyone who has watched an episode of *Downton Abbey* will be familiar with the role Pavel claimed as the one he was chosen for.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek word *parresia* means “bold resolve” or “leaving a witness that something deserves to be remembered” (HELPS Word Studies: 3954).

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word *kratoithenai* is often translated as “strengthen” and can also mean “confirm.”

<sup>21</sup> The NIV translates *eso anthropon* as “inner being” yet the Greek word *anthropon* ordinarily means “humanity” or “humankind” (and from which we derive such English words as “anthropology,” the study of humanity). Given Pavel’s focus in this section on the great Uncovering being the work of forming a new humanity, the NIV’s choice to emphasize the singular individual rather than the corporate human community is surprising.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek word Pavel used is *kataoikesai*, which is a cognate of *oikeo* with its rich connotations of residing, abiding, and home. The verb, translated as “dwells,” has a rich, biblical history, beginning with the stories of Israel’s Tabernacle (c.f. Exodus 26-27ff.) in which the Lord’s presence was said to dwell. The “dwelling place of God” transitioned to the Solomonic Temple (c.f. 1 Kings 8ff.) and later God’s presence “dwelled among us” in the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and promises to dwell in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23) among all people.

<sup>23</sup> Here is a good example of a translator’s influence on how a verse is read. The Greek word used is *exischysete*, which means “to be able” or “to have strength for,” and is translated by the NIV as “power.” I wonder about the NIV’s fascination with power imagery in this passage. I understand the English word power may convey “to have the ability to” but in our culture comes loaded with baggage of human (or even military) strength and certainly weighted with baggage that implies hierarchy (e.g. the athlete who is “bigger, stronger, faster” according to the Olympic motto). However, throughout Ephesians 2 and 3, Pavel sought to flatten human hierarchy and establish a mindset of just equality and compassionate community. I have chosen the string of verbs that follow this footnote precisely because Pavel wanted us “to be able” to grasp this wondrous truth of what Imma is up to in Jesus.

<sup>24</sup> The conjunction *oun*, ordinarily translated as therefore, links Pavel’s instruction in chapter 4 with the doxological affirmation at the end of chapter 3, which I paraphrase here before moving forward.

<sup>25</sup> Pavel used two Greek words that both translate as “call” or “calling” but which have the connotation, respectively, of “invitation” and “summon.” The first of these words, *kleseos*, is used also in verse 4 and in the New Testament always refers to a divine call, (c.f. Strong’s Concordance: 2821).

<sup>26</sup> This is a shameless insertion of two PCUSA ordination vows as appropriate paraphrase of “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

<sup>27</sup> I am reminded that repetition was a literary device for providing emphasis in the days before **bold**, underlined, or *italicized* text. The Greek text uses variants of *pas*, English for “all,” four times in ten words.

<sup>28</sup> c.f. John 10:16.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth*. (Josey-Bass: San Francisco, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Pavel used the Greek word *porneia*, from which we get the English pornography and *pleonexia*, which conveys an aggressive desire for advantage. I am reminded of the phrase “influenza.”

<sup>31</sup> The Greek word used here is *eucharistia*, which means thanksgiving. Because the Eucharist as a Catholic term for Holy Communion is well-known to many readers, I include it in the paraphrase. I like the idea of our speech being sacramental.

<sup>32</sup> The Greek word used is *apatheia*, which translates as “disobedient” but from which we get the English word “apathy.” I am intrigued that people’s disobedience to the God-life is due to not caring about—rather than not knowing about—right from wrong.

<sup>33</sup> Pavel’s quote cannot be found in ancient writings. Either the quote source was lost to history, is a part of an ancient, Christian hymn, or Pavel merged and paraphrased several Isaiah passages (9:2, 26:19, and 60:1). As a paraphraser myself, I lean toward the third explanation.

<sup>34</sup> See the introduction for a note on this passage.

<sup>35</sup> c.f. Genesis 2:24.

<sup>36</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, “Who can stand?” This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, “Who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9) Pavel used words for standing four times in three sentences. His application of this theme differs from this common stream slightly in that he addresses the need to stand not in the Day of the Lord but in all the days leading up to it, with the presumption that learning to stand now, day-by-day, will lead to standing in the Day.

<sup>37</sup> *Imago dei* is a Latin term theologians use that means image of God. Theologians use *imago dei* to refer to the truth that all humankind are created bearing God’s image within them (c.f. Genesis 1:27).

<sup>38</sup> Pavel returned to an earlier theme introduced in 1:9 and expanded upon in chapter 3: the Uncovering, (the Greek word is *mysterion*, commonly translated as “mystery”). In 3:5-6 we learn that the precise nature of the mystery uncovered in Jesus, which Pavel proclaimed, is the unity and oneness of all nations. I note here that this message is so embedded in our Western psyche that it is difficult for us to imagine how radical a thought this was in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Further, in the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, such a thought was seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans’ presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Pavel’s preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off-shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built.

# PRAYING

# PHILIPPIANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING PHILIPPIANS

Philippi was a Roman colony on a major trade route. Its church was an early supporter of Paul's missionary endeavors. As a Roman colony, many Philippians would have been Roman citizens or surrounded by others immersed in the privilege of Roman citizenship, so a key sub-text of Philippians, the letter, is the interplay between being a citizen of the Empire versus a citizen of God's kin-dom.

Philippians is a beloved letter—its four, brief chapters littered with cherished and well-known phrases.

- “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”
- “...have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:” (followed by the hymn to Jesus' taking on human form).
- “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”
- “Whatever were gains for me I now consider loss for the sake of knowing Christ.”
- “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”
- “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
- “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
- “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

The dilemma in trying to craft an interpretive paraphrase of such well-known and cherished verses is two-fold. First, the verses are so well known that they get in the way of sacred imagination: I struggled to find words comparable and adequate. How does one improve upon “Rejoice in the Lord always”? I am not sure it is possible and am sure I did not improve upon any of these verses. However, my commitment to seek insight into God's Word through fresh yet faithful paraphrasing compelled me to attempt to capture the heart of the text. If the joy is in the journey, this journey has been a most joyous one.

The second dilemma in paraphrasing well-known and cherished verses is to embed them within the letter's narrative rather than allow them to stand alone. There is a saying among literary critics, “Shakespeare wrote plays, not quotes.” We often know Shakespeare's quotes better than his plays. This is true of Paul's letter to the Philippians, too. Many a Christian poster has pictured a marathon runner (or some other rigorous endeavor) and carried the

message, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Yet this verse has a specific context in Paul's letter. To divorce the quote from the context creates an alternate meaning—one the Apostle did not convey. I seek in this interpretive paraphrase to tell the story of Paul's letter to the Philippians rather than offer marketing opportunities for Christian poster designers.

Readers of previous work in the *Praying Paul* series know of my habit of using a different variation of the name Paul for each letter. I do this to help myself and my readers extend our sacred imagination beyond our culturally conditioned boxes which imprison our hearing of God's Word. But this begs the question: Does merely changing what we call the Apostle impact how we hear what is written? For me, the answer is yes.

As I have searched Google Translate for linguistic variants for the name “Paul,” I have discovered subtle prejudice within me. I keep imagining Paul as a white, western, seminary educated author. In other words, I imagine Paul in my own image (I am chagrined to admit publicly). Merely changing what I call the Apostle forces me to confront my prejudice and allow Paul's *essential foreignness* to confront me.

What do I mean by Paul's *essential foreignness*? Paul was neither white, nor western, and his “seminary education” far surpassed the paltry three years I had. Paul was a Jewish rabbi and a Roman citizen. He lived in both worlds and sought to build a Gospel bridge between them. Paul lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, an era of intense patriarchy and ruthless, oppressive Roman rule, yet sought also to build a bridge to a future in which diversity, equity, and inclusion would mirror God's call for justice and *shalom*<sup>1</sup> found in the Hebrew Scripture. We cannot understand Paul unless we accept his *essential foreignness*.

To assist in the task of such acceptance, *Praying Philippians* uses the Chinese variant of the Apostle's name: Baoluo. In addition, Timothy becomes Timotai, Epaphroditus becomes Mafeng Cao, Euodia and Syntyche become Oudiya and Hecheng, and Clement becomes Kelaimente. Every time I wrote “Baoluo” I was reminded that I must move beyond my own assumptions and prejudice to search for the full depth of meaning Baoluo seeks to proclaim. I suspect (and hope) my readers will have a similar experience.

Brad Munroe  
June 2021

## Philippians 1:1-11

Baoluo and Timotai, who serve Jesus the Anointed, to all who are set apart<sup>2</sup> from distorted values and set apart for Imma's vision, and also to those Imma called into the leadership of her gathering<sup>3</sup>—both elders and deacons: may the loving-kindness and *shalom* of Imma our Mother and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar,<sup>4</sup> live within you and speak boldly through you.

I remember you all with gratitude to Imma—always gratitude. Whenever I pray, I remember not just certain individuals but all y'all as a gathering, for you all are Imma's family, members of her kin-dom. And as I pray, I experience joy remembering all we have shared in common:<sup>5</sup> our deep friendship and holy community, our spirited fellowship that leads us into holy compassion for all the world. We have shared in being blessed by the Good News story of Jesus and in being the instruments of blessing for others through Jesus' story. It is Jesus who both began Imma's work of healing and wholeness within us and will bring Imma's work to full completion—crafting us into our true selves. That day, the Day of Jesus, will be the source of unending rejoicing.

Don't begrudge an old man from feeling this way about y'all.<sup>6</sup> You all are my heart, and I feel this way about you whether I am in a Roman prison<sup>7</sup> or in the Greek marketplace, both while crafting the definitive statement in favor of the Good News and when arguing its case before the highest courts.<sup>8</sup> We have shared Imma's loving-kindness, and she is my witness that not just my heart but all my most inward being<sup>9</sup> pours out in *agape*<sup>10</sup> for you through Jesus the Anointed.

I pray that all of you would have so much *agape* that it would be superfluous<sup>11</sup>—your *agape* overflowing the cup, running off the table, and splashing on the floor! I pray your excess of *agape* will help you all to discern wisdom and perceive Imma's work more clearly—the colors of Imma's artistry becoming more vibrant to you day by day. I pray your integrity would shine clear in the light of the sun<sup>12</sup> such that even your enemies will have no word to speak against you. I pray the Day of Jesus will arrive and find you bursting with justice, right relationships<sup>13</sup> behind, beside, and before you, the Divine Spirit transparent for all to see. All this will be to Imma's praise, a proper reflection of her life upon, within, and through you.

*The old man sat upon his porch,  
gratitude welling up within,  
his rocker swung back and forth upon a rug,  
a family heirloom handed down through generations.  
The old man's friendships are like that rug,  
a tapestry whose threads persist in remaining tight,  
perhaps worn and weary,  
but conveying the beauty of a life well lived.*

God, it's me. I am jealous of Baoluo's relationship with the Philippians. Instead of the human tendency to have "transactional" relationships, Baoluo simply loves his flock (and they love him back). Such love is not about what each can get but a willingness—indeed, an eagerness—to show what each can give. And Baoluo gives the gift of himself, just like he learned from Jesus. Imma, may I learn to love like this. May I love and pray for those who are my heart. May my friendships be thankful for getting but focused on giving through Jesus the Anointed.

## Philippians 1:12-26

Now as you know, my beloved, I am in a Roman prison for my work as one sent<sup>14</sup> by Jesus. What I want you also to know is that Abba is still at work through me. The Good News story of Jesus is marching forward, advancing through the ranks of the Roman guards, with all of them clear that I am in chains but remain utterly free, in prison but am completely emancipated, under guard yet liberated still. It is obvious both to the guards and to our beloved in Jesus that no jailer's cell can contain the Good News. Seeing my example, our beloved have become all the more assured in Abba and enthusiastic to tell others the Good News.

Now please hear me: some of their enthusiasm is misplaced. Some tell the Good News to prove themselves more adept at it than me, (which is weird because it's not a contest). Their motives are those of inflated and ever-expanding egos. Most others tell the Good News because of their sincere *agape*. They appreciate my situation, that I am in prison, and want to partner together to uphold the Good News. Whatever the motives, both for ego or for partnership, the person and work of Jesus is spoken. If some want to cause me trouble or make me look bad, what does that matter? The only thing that matters is that the

Good News story of Jesus is told to others. Whenever the Story is told, I rejoice!

I will continually rejoice—never stop rejoicing! I rejoice that your prayers and Abba's provision open the flood gates of the Divine Spirit in me. I will be rescued through bluntness<sup>15</sup> as I proclaim Jesus in words and deeds, with eagerness and enthusiasm matching the very best of our beloved. In body and soul, I will be rescued. Whether I live or die, I will be rescued.

The way I see it: If I live, that would be awesome! If I die, I get to meet Jesus face-to-face, which would also be awesome! If I live, I continue to taste the sweet fruit of service to Jesus. If I die, my true self will blossom into its perfect form. Which is better? I'm not sure, for it is a tough choice (though not up to me). It seems more necessary for your sakes for me to abide in this earthly tent (at least for now), so I'll reside in this body (at least for now). And as long as I live and move and have my being among you all, I shall serve you, always seeking your fullness and flourishing, your formation and transformation into the image of Jesus the Anointed. Then, when I finally get to see you face-to-face, we will rejoice together!

*Hamlet's question  
spoken not with despair but longing,  
the wistful hope of a lover's seeking.*

*Someday,  
(even if today is not that day),  
nor The Day.*

*Until then,  
joyful service it shall be!  
What other choice is there?*

God, it's me. My good friend just faced Baoluo's fork in the road. I actually have had many friends confront the two paths that both point forward yet in such different directions. I am reminded of Isaiah's promise: "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of the Lord remains forever."<sup>16</sup> Abba, when I confront "the end," I pray I may face it with humility and grace. The grass will wither, the flowers will fade, so I put my hope in you.

## Philippians 1:27-30

Whatever you do, wherever you are, live as citizens<sup>17</sup> of Imma's kin-dom: claim the rights and fulfill the responsibilities of those whose life resides above. Philippi may be a Roman colony, but your true citizenship is neither Rome nor any province; therefore, devote yourselves to Imma's justice and joy, serving her desire for *shalom* for all people. This is the only proper way to serve the Good News of Jesus.

If you are always doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason, you never need to worry if anyone sees you. And doing the right thing together is its own reward and makes y'all able to stand together as one, a unity in community. Unity in the Divine Spirit builds confidence because you know Imma is working upon each one of you and through all of you together; Imma is making y'all whole and complete.

Those who oppose your citizenship in Imma's kin-dom need not be feared, for you stand<sup>18</sup> together. Those who oppose the ways of Imma's justice and joy, or her desire for *shalom* for all people, will be led into ruin—their plans becoming like the grass that withers and the flowers that fade.<sup>19</sup> You all, however, will stand, even if you suffer. Suffering often accompanies Good News service, as you see in my own life!

*Make America Great Again.  
Build Back Better.  
We hear a lot about being a (true) American.*

*What if our citizenship is not what it seems?  
What if our allegiance is higher, more compelling?  
What if our devotion is to the kin-dom?*

*Who would we love and how would we love them?  
What would we do and when would we do it?  
Where would we place the "border wall" for our love?*

God, it's me. I too easily get drawn into politics, and it can be a distraction. Much greater than politics is faith—it calls me to account for how I love my neighbor. Imma, make me a good steward of how I love my neighbor! Help me to love through personal choice; help me to love through direct action. Help me to love through community response; help me to love through advocacy. Help me to love as the one who

overturned tables; help me to love as one who overturns unjust legislation. Help me, Imma, to express my faith as a citizen of your kin-dom, (even if it involves politics).

### Philippians 2:1-11

If being immersed in Jesus' love leads you to thanksgiving—gratitude overflowing from your deepest, truest self; if you overflow with so much comfort, courage, and connection with the Divine Spirit that your soul feels like it might burst; if being Abba's partner in Good News work is the well-spring of your joy; then you have all that you need to make my joy full and complete and just as Abba designed it.

So here's what I need you to do: seek together with a common mind;<sup>20</sup> breathe as one the one Breath of the Divine Spirit; live as those whose identities share a common source—Jesus the Anointed. If you share a common mind, spirit, and heart in this way, your actions won't be directed by intrigue and ego but guided by humility and *koinonia*. Your actions will lean in the direction of *agape* for everyone you meet. As you share a common mind, spirit, and heart, you will aim for each other's wholeness and not just your own. Your relationships with one another will express the self-emptying<sup>21</sup> love of Jesus the Anointed:<sup>22</sup>

Who, though he wore Abba's dress shirt,  
cared not to claim ownership of Abba's wardrobe;

Instead, he went naked into the world,  
taking the shirt off his back to give to the oppressed;

He who possessed all divine power and prerogative,  
let it go and would not take it up again;

Not until his servant's work was complete;  
and his death assured—even death on a Roman cross!

Oh, Abba was well-pleased,  
lifting him up to highest heaven and then even higher;

Abba gave to him the Name above every name,  
to be sung in depths and heights, now and into eternity;

This Name, Jesus, causes knees to bend,  
this Name, Jesus, causes tongues to shout praise;

And Abba dressed Jesus in his full splendor,  
the divine wardrobe—all of it!

Even a crown.

*Emptiness shapes vision;  
beauty found in the space between.*

*Absence invites waiting and longing;  
becoming the measure of hope.*

*Stillness the canvas of our becoming.  
Silence the symphony we learn to hear.*

*Wonder and imagination, then, become the womb  
of divine nature perfected as human form.*

God, it's me. The mystery of Jesus' Incarnation still astounds, even after all these years. I know the confession; have studied the history, the theology, the controversy. And at the end of these heady deliberations, I am still only left with, "Wow, just wow." Actually, Abba, that's not all I'm left with. In my heart is thanksgiving and wonder and awe. In my will is a commitment to empty myself of my own privilege and prerogative, just as Jesus did. In my life, teach me the way of Jesus that I may make your joy complete.

### Philippians 2:12-18

So, friends, as you have sat under my tutelage and listened attentively while I was with you, continue your partnership with Imma—you working with Imma and she at work within you.<sup>23</sup> This partnership leads you to awe and reverence, causing you to tremble but always crafting your true self. Trembling is good! For trembling means you are experiencing Imma's handiwork in your person, which leads to the healing and wholeness she intends for you.

Walk every path without grumbling; hear hard truths without murmuring.<sup>24</sup> There should be no fussing or fighting among y'all, which distracts from the journey you are on—toward shining clear in the light of the sun.<sup>25</sup> Instead, journey together as Imma's beloved and walk the

path that leads straight rather than detours through the mud and muck. The path that leads straight will make you to shine like stars in the night even amidst deepest darkness. This path shines light upon the Word of Life—keep walking on it!

As you walk the path that leads straight and shines light upon the Word of Life, I will burst with pride. Neither my own difficult days nor even outright persecution will keep me from rejoicing in your trusting of Imma—all y'all make my heart so happy! Be happy with me, rejoicing in your partnership with Imma.

*Partnership  
woven intent  
organically connected, intertwined  
purpose and passion embracing  
we*

God, it's me. You know that I'm a team guy. Solitary runs are not my thing. I much prefer team sports—like basketball and water polo and church. I love the “teamness” of our life together, even if I get frustrated with my teammates (from time to time). I love that you join in the fun—the work we do with one another inspired and in-spirited by your Spirit. Imma, help me neither grumble nor murmur the next time I get frustrated with a teammate. Help me to live as one who believes: we are better together.

### **Philippians 2:19-30**

I expect to send Timotai to you soon, so I can hear about how y'all are doing. Hearing about you makes my heart happy, and I trust Timotai to shower you with care and concern as if I was with you myself. So many seek only their own good and not the will of Jesus the Anointed, but Timotai serves as a faithful and dutiful son, working side-by-side to share Good News. I will send him as soon as I can and will come myself shortly thereafter.

When I send Timotai, I will have Mafeng Cao<sup>26</sup> to join him on the trip. Mafeng Cao has been tremendous: my brother, my partner, my compatriot. He represented you all well, as a faithful ambassador of your love and goodwill toward me. Unfortunately, Mafeng Cao got sick and almost died, and he could not assist me as a partner in serving the Good News. It made him quite distressed both to be unable to help and when he learned you had heard

about his illness. He worries you will think he failed in his task of representing all y'all as my helper.<sup>27</sup>

I thank Abba that he had mercy upon him, for my heart would have grown from sorrow to sorrow had Mafeng Cao not recovered. Therefore, I am quite eager to send him to you, both for his own wellness and to lessen my worry. I expect you to treat him like a returning Olympian! He may not have run as fast as you expected of him, but he ran the race as one who is trustworthy and true. When you could not walk, he ran on your behalf; therefore, honor him and celebrate that he emptied himself for the work of Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

*Victory in defeat  
the race not to the fastest  
but to the one who runs.  
Church, are you listening?*

God, it's me. I know churches. I lead congregations. I know our propensity to be cruel. Too often do we blame—too easily do we judge—another for things we ourselves will not attempt. Forgive us, Abba! Free us from the bondage of small minds and smaller hearts! Make us a people who praise the attempt—leaps of faith a cause for celebration. Make us a people who honor effort and intent—for loving is difficult. Make us a people who refuse to outsource the job of caring for one another, for we all belong to Jesus and all have a part in the partnership.

### **Philippians 3:1-11**

Moving on, my beloved, open your hearts to Imma's joy and let her give voice to your songs. It's not irksome for me to remind you of that which is trustworthy: discern who are the dirty dogs among you! Watch for them and watch out for their malice—who cut themselves and call themselves godly. We are the ones who belong to Imma—who serve her through the Divine Spirit, who trust only in Jesus the Anointed, who are bold to believe that what matters is not what we do but what Imma does in us, for us, and through us in Jesus.

If I wanted to brag about my human accomplishments, I could. If someone thinks they have street cred in the eyes of religious fanatics, I have more. I am a child of the Covenant, snipped on the 8<sup>th</sup> day just like Torah commands. I am of the people of Israel—God's

chosen! Israel's first king was from my tribe. I am as Hebrew as Hebrew gets. You want intensity? I was a member of the group called The Scrupulous. You want zeal? I persecuted Jesus by targeting members of the gathering. You want conscientious? I obeyed every rule, regulation, statute, law, precept, and decree there was—not one did I break!

But here is my deepest conviction: all the good things I owned—all my accolades and accomplishments—it all just added up to a bad deal.<sup>29</sup> I am of the most learned opinion that it was a scam compared to knowing Jesus. All my wheeling and dealing of claiming goodness and pretending to be pure was no bargain at all. I threw all this in the dumpster in the alley behind my house to welcome an offer I could not refuse: Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar, would make me whole again. More than whole, Jesus would give me a new vocation, with benefits! Through simple trust, Jesus made me right with Imma. Through simple trust, I know life from death and have become a partner in the family business—even if that means joining Jesus in suffering. Jesus is the real deal—and I am all in to join the family business, even if it means my death, for I know that, in Jesus, life comes from death.

Let me be clear: I am still just an apprentice in the family business. I am barely a mail clerk in the basement, but I have my sights set on more important work. I neglect my former life and its ways to pursue this new life with full vigor. I see the corner office and have my sights set on it, for the one who sits in that office gets to perform the truly important work: entering into suffering for the sake of its healing and descending into death for its transformation into new life. That's the work I feel called to do and, with Imma's help, will keep pursuing it, all the way to heaven. Through simple trust, I will walk together<sup>30</sup> with Jesus the Anointed. I trust him to teach me the family business.

*“What do you want to be when you grow up?”*

*Whimsical are the responses from children:*

*“I want to be an astronaut who walks dogs on the moon.”*

*Cynical and anxious the responses become:*

*“I don't care. I just need to pay some bills.”*

*Rarely do we hear:*

*“I want to die to Christ and be partner in suffering.”*

*What do you want to be when YOU grow up?*

*God, it's me. Accomplishments and accolades seduce me to comfort and to avoid challenge. The pursuit of higher pay is not the pursuit of a higher purpose. Imma, I thank you for your willingness to teach me the family business and for your patience. I acknowledge I still have much to learn about the way of Jesus! Teach me still, teach me always, teach me 'til I am ready to be made a “partner in the firm.”*

### **Philippians 3:14 - 4:1**

The journey with Jesus walks toward becoming whole and complete<sup>31</sup>—the perfect version of our true self. If you don't understand this yet, you will. At least continue walking with Jesus in the direction of your becoming your true self, for you don't want to take a detour or get lost. Walk together and follow my example. Timotai and I are role models for you, as are those who live as we live. There is a method<sup>32</sup> to our way: the beat that teaches you how to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. Don't try to learn how to dance by yourself—dancing is a group activity!

As I have said before, it grieves my heart that some oppose the Cross of Jesus. I lament that they cannot perceive the sublime beauty of Abba's rhythm, which Jesus so eloquently danced. It is the rhythm of self-emptying, of letting go so to be filled, of being filled so to be poured out as an offering—empty once more, empty anew, ready to be filled again with the fullness of the Divine Spirit. These enemies of the Cross are so focused on grabbing and getting, on feeding their face and their vanity. They are so earthly bound as to be no heavenly good. Indeed, they cannot hear heaven's harmonies and so do not dance the God-rhythms.

As I said before, Philippi may be a Roman colony, but your true citizenship is neither Rome nor any province but Abba's kin-dom. We eagerly anticipate our wholeness will come from participating in the kin-dom with Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Jesus, who is actively at work all around, within, and through us, is ushering all things toward their designed purpose. We, also, have a designed purpose, and Jesus is leading us there so that our humility may be clothed with dignity and our silenced voices may learn to sing Abba's praise. So, my beloved, you who are my heart's joy and my life's great achievement, stand strong in Abba by following the example you have been given.

*Model showing way  
Method building memory  
Way becoming life*

God, it's me. I thank you for my role models—parents and teachers and coaches, pastors and elders and deacons. But also, the widow in the third pew who courageously brings her grief with her to church. And the Friend of Bill Wilson who survives sobriety one day at a time. And the contractor who can't sit still for an hour (and so doesn't come to church) but whose life is daily devoted to helping others. Abba, I have so many role models! I pray that I may "pay it forward," sharing the grace I have most abundantly received.

**Philippians 4:2-3<sup>38</sup>**

Let me make this short and sweet: Oudiya and Hecheng, get a grip! Stop your fussing and fighting; it doesn't become those who belong to Jesus. I urge and encourage you to seek a common mind in Imma. And I ask you, my true companion, to help them. Both Oudiya and Hecheng have labored with me to defend and promote the Good News (along with many others, of course, including Kelaimente, all of whom have their names reserved around the Table at Imma's Feast). Let's all put our pride aside so we can get on with the work that is before us—the work of sharing Good News!<sup>34</sup>

*Who is right? I am! I am!*

*Who is to blame? Not me! Not me!*

*Too. Much. Self. Not enough love.*

God, it's me. I know these two women. I have been these two women. I have witnessed the destruction with which we have laid waste to congregations. I have been blind to my own destructive behavior. Oh, Imma, teach all of us who reside and abide as members of your Church how to do the little things that lead to life: like chagrin, regret, and confession; like healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Imma, teach us how to practice what we preach.

**Philippians 4:4-7**

Claim Abba's gift!<sup>35</sup> Delight in Abba's love! Rejoice today, tomorrow, and into eternity! I'll be glad to repeat myself: let wonder fill your soul.<sup>36</sup>

Stop trying so hard to create something you cannot manufacture. Rather than striving and exerting, simply be. Allow yourself to open to the gentle Breath of the Divine Spirit. Give yourself permission to let your calm and gentle trust of Abba be unveiled for all to see.

Abba is just around the corner. There's no need to worry or be anxious and every reason to trust and rest assured. Abba has hold of you, so tell him your concerns and make your requests for self and others; say it all with thanksgiving. And Abba's *shalom* will overshadow you all, filling your perception of the God-life beyond the brim and to overflowing, keeping watch over your hearts and your minds in Jesus the Anointed.

*After a night with a sick child,  
groggy from trying to sleep in an ER waiting room,  
the Psalmist claims, "Joy comes in the morning."<sup>37</sup>*

*Crying out,  
pouring my soul into Abba's hands,  
breathing in the Spirit that tells me I am never alone,*

*the morning comes, and with it, Abba's shalom,  
like dew upon the grass as I wrap myself in his shawl,  
a cup of grace steaming dark and hot in my hand.*

God, it's me. In a world cluttered with fear-mongering, Baoluo's call to double-rejoicing is the first bloom upon the winter tree and the monsoons upon the summer desert. Double-rejoicing is a well-spring that comes from resting in you, trusting in you, finding in you our truest source of peace. Abba, teach me anew how to double-rejoice. Teach me to learn it by rote and then live it by heart. Teach me to practice double-rejoicing until it is first nature. Teach me that double-rejoicing unclutters my little corner of the world (for I am sick and tired of all the fear-mongering).

**Philippians 4:8-9**

From here on, beloved, seek the wonder of what is right, just, and good; the wonder of what brings honor, beauty, and admiration. Contemplate all wonders filled with virtue and worthy of praise. Let wonder fill your soul!

As I have been your role model in walking with Jesus deeper into trust and obedience, follow my example. As you have learned from me, reflect upon and seek to become. As you have received from me, welcome for yourselves and share with others. As you have heard from me, repeat and memorize that it may live within you. As you have seen in me, practice, practice, practice. As you immerse yourselves in Imma, her *shalom* overshadows you!

*Contrary to conventional wisdom,  
You are NOT what you eat,  
You are NOT the sum of your possessions,  
You are NOT here for a time and then cease to exist.*

*Contrary to conventional wisdom,  
You ARE wonder and awe,  
You ARE the fullness of she you wonder about,  
You ARE created for eternity.*

*Think about it.*

God, it's me. So much of my day is filled with my "To-Do" list that I forget to wonder. Imma, when did I stop pondering your love and contemplating your grace? When did I start living as though I have life figured out? When did I start practicing Deism?<sup>38</sup> Restore me, Imma, to what is right and just and good. Renew me as I ponder the wonder of that which brings honor and beauty and admiration. Refill my soul as I contemplate what is filled with virtue and worthy of praise.

**Philippians 4:10-23**

My joy overflowed in Jesus that you were finally able to express your love and care in tangible ways. That is, that the *kairos*<sup>39</sup> moment for your affection for me came and you leapt at the opportunity.<sup>40</sup> I'm not mentioning this because I want more from you. Indeed, I have learned the God-rhythm of enough: enough when hungry and enough when feasting, enough when abundance welcomes me

home and enough when scarcity beckons me to follow it into the street. No matter the situation, no matter the circumstance, I trust Jesus will strengthen me to meet the challenges of the day.

Still, though I am not currently in need of your help, I appreciate you all supporting me. You Philippians know what it was like in the beginning of my ministry of sharing the Good News. Not one of the gatherings stepped up financially—no one except y'all. But y'all were generous in your support! Even when I was in Thessaloniki you sent me financial support for my work, which became our work.

This is not a backhanded way to ask for more money. I don't need more support from you but for you to get all the credit and acclaim all y'all deserve. I have enough and even more because of the gifts you had Mafeng Cao bring with him. These gifts were handed to me but given to Abba. Your generous giving is true worship—an offering, the true meaning of sacrifice that brings Abba joy. And Abba will fill you, too, with the blessing of enough through Jesus the Anointed, for all the earth belongs to him.<sup>41</sup> To Abba our Father resound songs of light that shine like the sun—forever and ever! Amen.

Greet all the gathering who belong to Jesus the Anointed. The sisters and brothers who are with me greet you, too. Indeed, all of Abba's children here send their greetings, most of all those who belong to Caesar's household. May the loving-kindness of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar, abide in your true self. Amen.

*Enough  
opponent of grasping  
friend of letting go*

*Enough  
opponent of the acquisitive spirit  
friend of peace*

*Enough  
opponent of affluenza  
friend of justice*

*Enough  
is  
enough*

God, it's me. As we near the end of our COVID-19 sheltering, I can't help but imagine a brawl in the streets: Abundance and scarcity stood toe to toe, and it was not a fair fight. The rich got richer and the "economically insecure" saw their insecurity soar to new heights. Sadly, this did not surprise, though another truth was also revealed: we, the people, choose to care for one another when we can (at least most of us). During this most desperate of years, we learned anew the blessing of enough and the joy of being generous. We learned that scarcity stalks our friends and neighbors. We learned that we, the people, need to stand tall, be counted, and let our voices be heard. After all, enough is enough.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios* which means “set apart” and is often translated as “saints” or “holy ones.”

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as “church.” The literal meaning is “gathering,” with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>4</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus’ authority as above Caesar’s authority.

<sup>5</sup> Baoluo used the Greek word *koinonia*, which translates as “fellowship” and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians is one of Baoluo’s later letters; written around 62 C.E., just a few years before Baoluo’s death.

<sup>7</sup> Paul is in and out of prison frequently in his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered. The Romans’ presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Baoluo’s preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off-shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word *apologia* is a technical term meaning “defense,” with the connotation of “making a case” such as an attorney or philosopher would make.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word *spanchnois* refers to the liver, kidneys, etc. and is an image of great passion. The English equivalent might be “spilling our guts.”

<sup>10</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *phiblos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a

close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>11</sup> The Greek word *perisseue* is usually translated as “abound” but can also be translated as “superfluous”; it conveys excess beyond what one needs or can use.

<sup>12</sup> “Shine clear in the light of the sun” is the literal definition of purity, as in there exist no contaminants, no mixed ingredients.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaiosisune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaiosisune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Baoluo’s theology. For Baoluo, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior. 😊

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word *apostoleos*, from which we get “apostle,” literally means sent one.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek word *parresia* can mean “speak openly, frankness or bluntness” and is translated as “sufficient courage” in the NIV. Though I am personally oriented toward diplomacy in my speech, I am intrigued by the idea that bluntness can have spiritual value in the proper circumstance.

<sup>16</sup> c.f. Isaiah 40:11.

<sup>17</sup> The Greek word used is *politeuesthe*, which is a technical term meaning “the kind of life expected of a citizen.” We miss Baoluo’s meaning if we miss his contrast between Roman citizenship and citizenship in the kin-dom.

<sup>18</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, “Who can stand?” This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, “Who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

<sup>19</sup> c.f. Isaiah 40:11. The reference is not in the Greek text but conveys the sense of dichotomy Baoluo draws between that which will be rescued and that which will be brought to ruin.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word *phronete* presents an interesting choice. It can mean “to think, to judge, or to seek for.” If one of the first two definitions is used, the emphasis in translation is on a single, settled idea (e.g. “have the same mind,” or, “come to the same conclusion”). The historical example of Christian churches suggests such settled conclusions are rare, so I have chosen to

emphasize the more dynamic sense of searching for a common mind.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek word *ekenosen*, from *kenosis*, will be used in 2:7 and has the connotation of emptying oneself. The analogy that comes to mind is voiding one's bladder, which seems like an *extremely poor image* to use for emptying one's divine power and prerogative and so is relegated to this footnote rather than inserted into the paraphrase.

<sup>22</sup> What follows is my vigorous attempt to avoid a paraphrase that enters into any controversy about the Trinity, the hypostatic union, and the *homoousios* versus *homooisios* debate of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. I should note the formatting is indented to indicate the scholarly consensus that this passage is one of the earliest Christian hymns.

<sup>23</sup> Baoluo used the Greek middle voice when he wrote "work out your salvation." The use of the middle voice connotes partnership. Active voice: I do. Passive voice: I have done to me. Middle voice: you and I do together. Salvation is an act of the middle voice.

<sup>24</sup> Baoluo referred to the Israelites in the desert (c.f. Exodus 16 and Numbers 14), whose rebellion against God took the form of grumbling or murmuring.

<sup>25</sup> The Greek word *eilikrineia*, usually translated as "sincerity" or "purity," literally means "clear in the light of the sun," as in there exist no contaminants, no mixed ingredients.

<sup>26</sup> His Greek name is *Epaphroditus*.

<sup>27</sup> This imputation of a motive for Mafeng Cao's distress is not in the Greek text but an inference from what might be expected from his role as the Philippians' emissary and his alleged failure to be helpful. Churches can "shoot their own wounded" when things don't go as planned. I note further that what seems like an aside in the letter gives context to what Baoluo wrote earlier in Philippians 2. That is, Baoluo offered the theological context (in 2:1-11) for the pastoral response he sought (in 2:19-30).

<sup>28</sup> An additional argument for seeing 2:1-11 as the theological context to undergird Baoluo's pastoral concern is found in this paragraph. I hear Baoluo protecting Mafeng Cao's intentions even if the results were less than ideal.

<sup>29</sup> Baoluo used words associated with economic transactions throughout this passage (i.e. *kerde*, meaning "business profit," and *zemian*, meaning "a business loss") so the paraphrase seeks to convey this as a sustained metaphor.

<sup>30</sup> Baoluo returned to the use of the middle voice for key verbs in this paragraph; specifically the verbs for "forgetting what is

behind" and "straining for what is before me." (NIV) Reminder: The Greek middle voice means something we do together.

<sup>31</sup> The Greek word translated as "mature" in the NIV is *teleios*, which means whole, complete, fulfilled or perfect (c.f. Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.").

<sup>32</sup> Shout out to my Methodist friends! Baoluo clearly wanted to use himself and his pattern for living the Way of Jesus as the example to follow.

<sup>33</sup> This section appears to be a letter fragment, in that it does not flow with the seam of Baoluo's thought from 4:1 and 4:4 and is directed toward several people not mentioned in the opening salutation. One of these persons is named only as "my true companion," and appears to be the person to whom the letter fragment was addressed. All this begs the question, "Who and what was Baoluo talking about?" The answer may be found in that this is a fragment of a different letter.

<sup>34</sup> This last sentence is not in the Greek text but is what I imagine Baoluo might have said as he continued his thought (assuming this section is a letter fragment).

<sup>35</sup> The Greek word translated "rejoice" is *chairete*, which is a cognate of *charis*, which is translated as "grace" (or gift). I seek to convey the wonder, surprise and delight of receiving a gift in the paraphrase.

<sup>36</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Bill Brown from Columbia Theological Seminary (and the Presbytery de Cristo) for his insights and wisdom about wonder as a theme throughout Scripture. c.f. *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World*. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 2015.

<sup>37</sup> c.f. Psalm 30:5.

<sup>38</sup> Deism is the belief that a Creator exists but does not intervene in the world.

<sup>39</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for "time." *Chronos*, from which we get the English "chronological," means sequential or linear time. *Kairos* refers to the key moment, the inflection point. When Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God saying, "Repent, the time is at hand," he referred to *kairos* time. When nine-months pregnant women shows up at a hospital saying, "It's time," she is speaking of *kairos*.

<sup>40</sup> The Greek word translated as opportunity is *ekeiresthe*, which is a cognate of *kairos*, the word for "time" that connotes the key moment or pivotal moment has arrived.

<sup>41</sup> c.f. Psalm 24:1.

# PRAYING COLOSSIANS:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

BRAD MUNROE  
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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING COLOSSIANS

Colossians is a companion piece to Ephesians and Philemon, as scholars suggest the three letters were written at the same time—near the end of Paul’s life while he was in prison. The letters were transported by Tychicus and Onesimus (c.f. *Praying Philemon*) to the various churches.

The vast majority of academic scholars argue for what is called “Deutero-Pauline” authorship, which refers to the common, ancient practice of a student writing in the mentor’s name as a way of honoring the mentor and giving street cred to the current work. (Did you know *Praying Colossians* was written by C.S. Lewis?) Scholars note a shift from Paul’s early letters to his later writings, a shift from earthy, socio-political concerns being expressed in his theology and ethics to a perspective some describe as tending toward the mystical or as having a more cosmic perspective.

While I have no heartburn over the notion that an ancient student of Paul wrote in his name as a way of honoring his mentor, I remain open to the possibility that Paul’s perspective shifted as he aged, which is something that happens in human development, as I can attest as I approach 60. For *Praying Colossians* (and *Praying Ephesians*), one practical effect of Paul’s shifting perspective is that I paraphrase “Jesus is Lord” as “Jesus, who is sovereign above the Cosmos,” rather than “sovereign above Caesar” as in previous work in the *Praying Paul* series.

A second example of this shift toward a more cosmic perspective in Colossians is found in the famous passage 1:15-20, with its description of Jesus as “the first-born of creation.” This phrase can be confusing to readers who live after the 4<sup>th</sup> century and are influenced by Greco-Christian controversies. For us, it can be difficult to hear this phrase as those in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish context would have heard it.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Emperor Constantine gathered all Christian bishops for two ecumenical councils at Nicaea and Chalcedon. These ecumenical councils produced what we know as *The Nicene Creed*. The Creed was concerned with defining the relationship of God and Jesus and utilized Greek philosophical thinking and Greek linguistics (even creating new Greek phrases) in the attempt to articulate the precise nature of Jesus’ being. It was all quite heady, with books published that made academic and ecclesiastic careers both then and now.

Here is the dilemma for us modern readers. When we read Paul’s phrase “first-born of all creation,” it

sounds like something that belongs at a council in which the precise nature of Jesus’ divinity, humanity, and relationship to Almighty God was being defined. But it doesn’t fit, or at least it should not have been used for this purpose at the Councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea, because Paul wrote as a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew. The Jewish cultural meaning of “first-born” referred to the son who was given authority and stewardship over the father’s business. When Paul said Jesus was “the first-born over all creation,” it was this Jewish meaning rather than a later, Greek, philosophical imprint that defined the term.

What I wrestle with in *Praying Colossians* is the question, “What does it mean that God has entrusted to Jesus the work of reconciling all creation?” Jesus’ work of reconciling all creation implies a wider focus than modern Christian readers often bring to Scripture. It is not just humankind who are the recipients of Jesus’ love but all creation (or perhaps I should capitalize and say all Creation, the entire Cosmos, not just what is seen but also what is unseen). The Good News of Jesus is surely an earthy, physical, incarnational Story, yet Colossians reminds us that the Good News also has a mystical, spiritual, and luminous element to it.

Readers of other works in the *Praying Paul* series knows it is my practice to seek a more global and inclusive perspective by using variations of the name Paul from other cultures. I believe we open our spirits to the Spirit’s work when we are able let go of—and set aside—our assumptions to discover what insight may come when hearing God’s Word with fresh ears. To wit, in the current work, the Apostle is named Poru, a Japanese name. Indeed, all names in the Greek text have been given their Japanese translation (thanks to Google Translate).

The most recent work in this series was in Philippians where I gave Paul his Chinese name, Baoluo. I noticed within me a subtle shift toward a more comfortable acceptance of Poru. Was it because I am becoming more open to hearing Poru (or Baoluo) or because U.S. relations with China are strained while Japan is an ally? What does the Spirit seek for me to hear about Jesus’ reconciling work of the entire Cosmos when I struggle to move beyond the limited frame of reference of my own country and culture?

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Brad Munroe  
June 2021

## Colossians 1:1-14

Poru, a sent one<sup>1</sup> of Jesus the Anointed through the grit and determination of Abba, and Chimoshi our brother, to Abba's set apart<sup>2</sup> ones in central Turkey, you who are trustworthy and true, my beloved in Jesus: loving-kindness and *shalom*<sup>3</sup> to you all from Abba our Father.

We give thanks when we pray to Abba, the Father of Jesus the Anointed—always giving thanks! We give thanks for your trust in Jesus that leads you to love everyone, especially those who have been called into Abba's family. We give thanks that the trust you express and love you share does not originate with you but comes from heaven. We rejoice it has become a wellspring of truth flowing in you and from you through the Good News story of Jesus. This same Good News blossoms into loving-kindness throughout the Creation<sup>4</sup>—the entire Cosmos coming under its influence—just as you, also, came under its influence when you became acquainted with the Good News. We give thanks that Epafurasu, our mission co-worker, told you this Good News and also told us about how the Breath of Abba is a wellspring of *agape*<sup>5</sup> flowing in you and from you.

We just can't stop praying for you! We pray y'all will know Abba on a first name basis and that Abba will fill all y'all with discernment and wisdom. We pray the Divine Spirit will help you put together all the pieces of the puzzle in the God-life—that you will walk and dance to God-rhythms; that you will learn to hear the whispers of the Divine Spirit; that you will continually grow in your ability to love all people with *agape*. We pray you will become so overwhelmingly and prodigiously powerful<sup>6</sup> in Jesus that you will be able to persevere in the work of *agape*, able to suffer as he suffered for the sake of others.<sup>7</sup> We pray such *agape* will be a wellspring of gratitude that leads all y'all to unending thanksgiving. We pray you all will become more deeply aware that Abba gives you a share in the family business: shining light into all the Cosmos, inviting all Creation to participate in Abba's kin-dom. Abba made us partners in the family business through Jesus, his beloved son, who vouched for us, is training us, cleans up our messes when we fail, and sets us back on our feet to continue the work of *agape*.

*When the family business is agape:*

*What is the product?*

*What do profits look like?*

*What marketing strategy can ever be appropriate?*

*When the family business is agape:  
children are fed,  
oppressed people are protected against violence,  
refugees are welcomed.*

*When the family business is agape:  
the "good life" is redefined,  
the "American Dream" gives way to God's vision,  
the Way of Jesus is both product and profit  
(and needs no marketing strategy).*

God, it's me. I thank you for people like Epafurasu who tell people the Good News. My "Epafurasu" was named Bill. I thank you for people like my church family who taught me how to love with *agape*. I thank you for all of my church families who strengthened me with courage and compassion to love with *agape*. Abba, I thank you, I thank you, I thank you. Like Poru, I cannot stop giving you thanks, for your love is a wellspring flowing in me! I want to be a partner in the family business, so who do you want me to love today with the *agape* you give everyday?

## Colossians 1:15-23

Let me tell you more about Jesus, Imma's beloved son. He is the perfect reflection<sup>8</sup> of Imma's divine nature,<sup>9</sup> and she has entrusted to him the family business of *agape*. His mandate is to bring *agape* not just to all people but to all Creation, not only to that which is seen but also to that which is unseen—every molecule, every atom, even the so-called "dark matter" will come under his influence and be touched by *agape*.

And Jesus is up to the task! He is the One who created all things, and all things serve the purpose he has designed for them. He is the One who spoke all things into existence, and his words bind everything together. He is the Entrepreneur and CEO of the family business, to which all y'all in the gathering<sup>10</sup> are a part. He launched Imma's latest and greatest *agape* initiative: to stop the relentless march of death, have it unwind so that only life remains. Defeating Death is quite the victory and shows that Jesus is in all things, above all things, the First and the Last and every breath in-between.

Imma was delighted to dwell within Jesus—to allow her divine radiance to be expressed in his humanity. She was thrilled to speak new creation into existence through

Jesus—to make right relationships<sup>11</sup> with all humankind and not just us but everything we can see, touch or hear (and that which is beyond our imagination, too). It pleased Imma to end the war and bring peace not through a display of “Mighty Power” but through an act so audacious no one saw it coming: Jesus gave his life that we might live.

Do you remember the war? You all used to think of Imma as your enemy. You all used to believe she was so distant that you could neither see her nor hear her nor feel her presence embracing you. You used to relish “raising Hell.” But then she broke through your defensive lines: using Jesus’ sacrifice, she brought you close and embraced you. She set you apart from your Hell raising days and set you apart for the work for which you are created: agape—the family business, with Jesus as your boss.

Continue to trust Jesus to help you, and you will be up to the task. Continue to stand upon the hope that in Jesus the entire Cosmos is coming under his influence, and you will be strong for the work. All the Cosmos, every last molecule and atom and even the dark matter, will hear the Story of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do. I, Poru, have become a servant in helping Jesus with this work.

*Image can be  
distorted reflection upon the water  
“She has her father’s eyes”  
skin deep in the mirror*

*Image is  
vision of Imma reflected in Jesus  
“He has his mother’s heart”  
the divine nature beating in a human chest*

God, it’s me. In my better moments, I desire to reflect your image to the world—for others to hear you when they hear my words and to see you when they see my actions. In my better moments, I long to be “the only Bible someone may read.” Imma, my better moments are too few and too far in-between. Break through my defenses again and again—as many times as needed—until I open myself to your influence; until I allow the image of Jesus to be imprinted upon my mind, my heart, my spirit.

## Colossians 1:24-29

As foolish as it sounds, I rejoice that I suffer for you. I suffer so that I may continue to strengthen your trust in Jesus and deepen your *agape* as his Body. I rejoice not for the sake of suffering but for the union I experience with Jesus knowing that he, too, walked the path of suffering.

I serve Abba by teaching you his Word and nurturing its message within you, allowing it to form and transform you more closely into the image of Jesus. I serve Abba who is unveiling for you the full and complete surprise: the “Wow! No one imagined that was going to happen!” moment uncovered in and through and for Jesus. The great Uncovering is that Abba desires all humankind to be one family, with Jesus leading the Way, pointing us all toward wonder and awe. Jesus is the One we talk about, teach about, and try to emulate in our own living. We only want for you all and everyone around you—indeed, for the entire Cosmos—to find wholeness in Jesus. I agonize<sup>12</sup> over how to do this to the best of my ability and am thankful I have more than my own abilities—Jesus is at work in and through me!

*Agony  
late Saturday night  
still seeking the right words*

*Agony  
beside the bed  
prayers for peace and presence when a “cure” is wanted*

*Agony  
spilling heart and mind for the sake of the Body  
trying to remember this work belongs to Jesus, not me*

God, it’s me. There is great comfort knowing the work of agape belongs to you. I accept I have a part to play: seeking to remain open to others, trying to express kindness and respect, being willing to sacrifice for another’s good. I have a part to play, but you do the real work: opening eyes and hearts, removing prejudice and confronting privilege, bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice. Abba, help me to do my work with vigor, knowing you are doing your work in me, through me, and (sometimes) despite me.

## Colossians 2:1-8

I want y'all to appreciate how closely I hold<sup>13</sup> you in my heart—not just you all but those in Laodicea and everyone else, even those who have not met me face-to-face. I desire for them and for you to possess courage of heart and comfort in the wisdom that *agape* knits you together with Imma. I desire for them and for you to possess the full and complete assurance that Imma's purpose, which has been uncovered in Jesus, is to welcome you into the kin-dom and embrace you with *agape*.

I share with you my heart so that no one will charm you with smooth talk to offer you a false hope; that no one will schmooze y'all away from *agape*. I may not be with you physically, but you possess my heart, which is filled with joy seeing how studiously you pursue the Way of Jesus. You do things decently and in good order<sup>14</sup> to keep yourselves close to Jesus!

Continue to practice the good order you were taught when you received Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above the entire Cosmos. As you devoted your lives to him, continue your devotion. As you dug the footers for your true home in him, continue to build upon this foundation. As you established trust in him, continue to discover that he is trustworthy, and your cup of thanksgiving will overflow, your *eucharistia*<sup>15</sup> becoming a wellspring in him. Guard yourselves against having your spiritual inheritance plundered through delusional thinking and practices that plunge you into this world's brokenness. Instead, focus your meditations on Jesus and continue the practices of his Way until they become holy habits.

*To whom do you give your heart?*

*The smooth-talking sales rep?*

*The kindly and knowledgeable physician?*

*The pontificating talking head?*

*Who holds your heart?*

*Your family?*

*Your friends?*

*Your faith community?*

*There is something sacred about this heart holding:  
sacred and precious and vulnerable.*

*Jesus, are you the only one I can trust with my heart?*

*Or are there others with whom I can share this gift?*

God, it's me. I trust you. I trust in you. Teach me to trust through you. Show me those people against whom I must protect my heart, even as you show me those people with whom I can entrust my heart. Show me how to be loving even as I am guarded, when being guarded is required. Lead me to rejoicing that there is one (or perhaps many) who I can trust to guard my heart from harm.

## Colossians 2:9-15

In Jesus, Abba's full presence dwells.<sup>16</sup> In Jesus, Abba's full radiance is given human form. In Jesus, our full and complete self—our true self—lives and moves and has its being. Jesus is the origin of every authority and the chief influencer in every movement in the God-life, the brains for the Body.

The "circumcision" that matters is the one that happens spiritually and mystically in Jesus. This circumcision cuts away all avarice, betrayal and corruption. This circumcision shatters your shame so that it can no longer affect (or infect) you. This circumcision buries your brokenness with Jesus through the ritual of baptism, as if the Divine Spirit carried you into the grave with Jesus (spiritually and mystically) and then led you from the Tomb along with Jesus (spiritually and mystically) that you might walk into new creation.

New creation is what you are in Jesus. You were dead in avarice, betrayal and corruption, and then Abba breathed his Divine Spirit into you—the *nephesh*<sup>17</sup>—and brought you to life in Jesus, through Jesus, with Jesus, and for Jesus. Abba did this for all of us! Abba took the judge's legal complaint that would have accompanied us into death and replaced it with the one that hung above Jesus' Cross: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."<sup>18</sup> When we die, we die with the King.

In Jesus, Abba stripped the powers of avarice, betrayal and corruption of their dignity and made them a public mockery. When these elemental forces come looking for us, they get a piece of Jesus. It's not a fair fight, not even close.

*The Story of the Cross is told as if...*

*as if it is my shame fueled decisions,*

*as if it is my ignorance due to the century in which I live,*

*as if it is my avarice, betrayal, and corruption.*

*What if the Story of the Cross is seen through other eyes...  
 What if Empire's right to privilege only some was nailed?<sup>2</sup>  
 What if Empire's power to oppress was nailed?<sup>2</sup>  
 What if the powers and principalities were really on trial?*

*What if the Story of the Cross is told...  
 as if God's love and my belovedness is the narrative,  
 as if God forming new creation is the narrative,  
 as if God did what we cannot and did it for everyone?*

*What if the Story of the Cross is about more than me?<sup>2</sup>  
 What if the Story of the Cross is about Empire?<sup>2</sup>  
 What if the Story of the Cross is told...  
 as if it truly is Good News?*

God, it's me. The powers indict me; the principalities convict me. Everything they charge is both absolutely true and completely false, the accusations both based in evidence and distortions of circumstance. The powers look and see me at my most vulnerable; they convict my basest moments. They tell a story that is only partially true, for they choose not to look at me as your beloved; fail to see your agape doing its work of transformation. The powers appeal to you as Judge, and you as Judge look and see and perceive my deepest, my fullest, my most complete truth: I belong to you. Case adjourned. Conviction overturned. Liberty restored.

### **Colossians 2:16-23**

Because Jesus stripped the powers and principalities of their dignity and made them a public mockery, these forces no longer have authority to indict you—no legal complaints will be forthcoming from the powers! So don't let mere people indict you either. Some judge what you eat and drink (or don't). Others judge what you do (or don't do), even how you observe the Sabbath and celebrate high holy days (or not). Remember that every ritual is but a path to lead you to a destination, but it is not the place itself. Remember that every sign points the way but it is not the Way. Remember that every symbol is designed to invite you deeper into wonder and wisdom, but both are only found fully in Jesus.

When you encounter someone trying to look good or be "super spiritual," remember they are not the boss of you. When you encounter someone trying to elevate themselves over you, remember they are talking out of

school—no one who is in Jesus thinks like this or talks like this. Such a person has lost connection with Jesus, who alone is the head of the Body. The Body doesn't go higher than the head! Even more, the Body can have only one head—the rest of us become a holy community as Imma knits our hearts, our minds, and our spirits together.

Because you are new creation—dead to the powers but alive in Jesus—why do you continue to play by the old rules that rigged the God-life against you? You try to look good rather than grow into goodness in Jesus. You try to see what others want and will praise rather than be nurtured in Jesus to become one whom Imma finds pleasing. You play by the old rules: "Don't, don't, don't" and "Better not even think about it!" Rules that seek to control us will be consumed in the Refiner's fire.<sup>19</sup> Such rules sound wise but are full of self-serving, self-congratulations, and self-flagellation; they cannot influence your inner character, your virtue, and your integrity. They cannot restrain desire but only punish it. They are of no value in crafting, forming, and transforming you toward your true self.

*Rules: fairness applied  
 yet limited influence  
 true power absent*

God, it's me. As I grow older, I tend to follow more rules: what to eat, keeping my bed made, not clashing colors when I pick out a shirt and tie. These rules keep me healthy and looking sharp (I hope), yet I know they cannot fulfill my heart's desire: to be more like Jesus, to love more like Jesus, to talk and walk, to pray and praise, more like Jesus. Imma, I pray you would fulfill my heart's desire. Is there a rule I should be following?

### **Colossians 3:1-4**

When Jesus stripped the powers and principalities of their dignity and made them a public mockery, at the same time he roused<sup>20</sup> you back to life (spiritually and mystically) and made you new creation. Contemplate what this means; ponder the wonder of it all. Observe with care where your heart is directed—that it be set toward Jesus to whom Abba has given charge over the family business. Observe with care where your mind is directed—that it be set on virtues and values pleasing to Abba rather than rutting about in the community dump. You are dead to the

powers but alive in Jesus, even if this wonder is hidden to the naked eye. Be assured, whenever<sup>21</sup> Jesus is unveiled<sup>22</sup> for others to see, you also will be seen with him, a reflection of his light and life.

*My heart wanders:  
revenge scenarios allowed to dance.*

*My heart wonders:  
Jesus' compassion calling, consuming, and compelling.*

*My mind wanders:  
Lotto fantasies flitting about.*

*My mind wonders:  
Micah's charge a three-fold challenge<sup>23</sup> to live this day.*

*Wandering or wondering?  
Which shall I feed?*

God, it's me. I love to be reminded of foundational things: where I look frames what I see; what I see influences perception; perception feeds discernment; discernment provokes decision; decision chooses a path. Abba, help me today to choose the path that leads to you and shares agape along the way.

### Colossians 3:5-11

Therefore, starve all the oxygen from the fires of lust, greed and corruption that rage within you. The Refiner's fire will purge you of all these distortions of the God-life; better to let them go yourself than have Imma rip them from your hands or away from your hearts. Let them go and continually let them go as you walk away from them. The practices that distort the God-life you once called your friends, but these so-called friends do not have your best interests in mind. They never did.

And while you're cleaning up your "friends list," delete both the porn that degrades and the propaganda that leads you to believe just about anything; delete both anger that inflames and avarice that destroys any hope of kind and generous self-giving; delete, too, all deceit and duplicity, especially that which comes from your lips. These so-called friends are a part of your false self but have nothing to do with the new creation your true self is becoming<sup>24</sup>—a work being crafted by the hands of Imma

herself. This work of Imma's crafting is being accomplished so that you may bear her likeness, her image, into the world. The work of Imma's formation and transformation of your true self is being done so that you may reflect her light, life and love to all whom you encounter. In Imma, all humanity is created *imago dei*.<sup>25</sup> In Imma, all ethnic distinctions collapse, all social differences unify, all economic disparities are made equitable, and all religious practice points toward the truth that Jesus is sovereign above the entire Cosmos—the all who is in all, above all, and for all.

*Poru never imagined Facebook.  
What would he think about "Theology by Meme"?*

*I know all about Facebook (or at least should).  
Who will I allow to be my friend?*

God, it's me. I confess I have some unsavory friends. I don't refer to my "friends in low places" that evoke Pharisaical reaction. I'm not worried too much about these friends, all of whom bear your imprint. I mean the so-called friends that distort your image within me: the voices, the visuals, the cravings that corrupt your image and prevent me from reflecting it to others. I repent of their friendship. Imma, help me say good-bye to them (and not miss them). Help me welcome friends whom you are using to fashion my true self into your image.

### Colossians 3:12-17

Abba chose you. You belong to Abba and are his beloved. You are set apart for Abba's work in the world. Dress for success in this work: with compassion and caring, with humility toward self and honor toward others, with patience, persistence, and perseverance. Wear these stylish threads and they will help you do your job in the family business: releasing the heavy load of grief and pain from your own heart and another's; renewing the possibility of *agape* toward one another; restoring right relationship. As you have learned the family business from Abba himself, put what you have learned into practice. And to top off your stylish ensemble, accessorize with *agape*, which is always in style. Indeed, *agape*, when worn by everyone, creates such sartorial splendor that all who are a part of the family business can't help but root for each other.

When there is a disagreement between you and another in the family business, go to the business umpire,<sup>26</sup> the arbiter of all things *agape*: whatever helps the work of Jesus prosper.<sup>27</sup> You all were invited and summoned to help Jesus' work prosper, so let that guide your every decision. Do this and gratitude will overflow your hearts.

Let the words of Jesus lounge around your family room—give them a seat on your favorite couch and carry on a conversation even while watching Netflix. Let the words of Jesus be your jam on the radio and sing soft lullabies to put you to sleep. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, with whomever you are doing it, let the words of Jesus abide deep within, sinking into the very marrow of your soul. Do everything the way Jesus would do it and to help his work prosper. And be grateful for the opportunity Abba gives you, for it's his family and his *agape*.

*"Dress for the job you want, not the one you have."*

*What shirt do I wear to lift up the oppressed?*

*Are jeans okay to walk with someone through trauma?*

*"Dress for success."*

*Are these shoes right for justice, kindness and humility?*

*What earrings go with feeding hungry children?*

God, it's me. I confess I often seek prosperity from Jesus rather than the prosperity of Jesus. (And even if I reject the word prosperity because of its negative associations with "the prosperity gospel," I still seek well-being from Jesus more than I seek the well-being of Jesus.) What is wrong with me? Why am I so self-centered, self-focused, self-absorbed? I am chagrined because I thought I was farther along the Way of Jesus, but his words convict my heart. Abba, as you forgive me so also free me to live (a bit more) for you. Transform my chagrin into confession and confession into conviction that I might continue my journey along the Way of Jesus.

#### **Colossians 3:18 – 4:1<sup>28</sup>**

Respect each other as an expression of your love for Jesus. Here is what mutual respect looks like in the household of faith.<sup>29</sup>

In married life, respect each other. Listen openly and speak kindly. Live as those in mutual, self-surrender that serves the other's best and true self.

In parent-child relationships, respect each other. Children should obey their parents and also honor them in the manner of their obedience. Parents, do not provoke your children to anger or exasperation. Though you are bigger and stronger, do not use your strength to abuse or intimidate.

Workers should serve the common good and seek the success of one's employer. Do it not just to keep your job but because doing a job well honors Jesus and expresses one's integrity. Do your job with zest and commitment, as if you are serving Imma herself in your daily life. Imma will see your heart and be pleased. Employers<sup>30</sup> be forewarned: Imma doesn't play favorites. If you wrong your employees, there will be consequences. Give your employees fair and equitable wages, provide a safe work environment, and treat them with respect. Imma is the Boss of you (and of us all), and you serve her by treating your colleagues well.

*Looking at you,*

*do I see my own reflection or the imago dei?*

*Listening to your lament,*

*do I hear what I want to hear or Imma's cry?*

*When I hear your heart,*

*do both our hearts beat as one?*

God, it's me. I hear people say, "Respect is earned," and I agree (to an extent). Yet it is my experience that respect is not about another but lives within my own spirit. It is my experience that respect is offered best when it is offered freely; given truly when given as a gift. I cannot expect from another what I am unwilling to offer nor to give. Imma, make me someone who is "respect-able" that my most sacred relationships would reflect the image of Jesus to all.

#### **Colossians 4:2-6**

Persevere in prayer, always alert for opportunities to be thankful. Pray also for us, that we might have opportunities to let people in on the divine mystery that is the great Uncovering—Jesus bridging the chasm between

peoples, Jesus reconciling Jews and Greeks to make a new humanity, Jesus reconciling the entire Cosmos!<sup>31</sup> Roman power has me in prison<sup>32</sup> but cannot silence the divine authority that commands me to speak.<sup>33</sup> Pray I speak it well—with clarity.

Stroll<sup>34</sup> through life with winsome wisdom upon your lips, especially toward those beyond the gathering. Always be ready to rescue the moment by having your speech seasoned with loving-kindness. If you speak with loving-kindness, you will respond to everyone as you should.

*I cannot hear what you say for your tone is too loud, too brash, too judgmental.  
I cannot attend to the words formed by your lips as they drool arrogance.*

God, it's me. For a faith founded on reconciliation, we sure seem to struggle with it. For a faith whose Master broke down the dividing wall of hostility between peoples, we sure seem to enjoy building walls between ourselves and others, especially with our words. Abba, teach me that others don't care what I know until they know I care—about them, about their family, about the struggles that hunt them and haunt them. Abba, teach me to season my every utterance with loving-kindness—tenderness the tone, humility the harmony, and virtue the volume of my every word.

### Colossians 4:7-18

Tychichus will tell you about me and about our situation. He is a dear brother, a faithful deacon, and fellow servant of Imma. He will invite<sup>35</sup> your hearts to courage and comfort. Tychicus is joined by Oneshimo, another trustworthy and dear brother, who, like you, is in Jesus.<sup>36</sup> Together they will tell you everything about what's going on with us.

Arisutarukosu, my fellow prisoner, greets you, as does Maku, who is Barunaba's cousin. If Maku comes to you, shower him with hospitality. Jesus (not the Sovereign but he who is called Tada) also sends greetings. These men are the only Jewish mission co-workers I have in this service to Imma's kin-dom. They are a great comfort to me.

Epafrasus, also one of you, is a servant of Jesus and sends greetings. He is like Jacob, wrestling with God,<sup>37</sup> especially in prayer for you. He prays you will stand

resolute in Imma's purpose, ever-growing into your true self, your assurance of Imma's presence absolute. I have put my stamp of approval upon him—he is a very hard worker, not just for y'all but for Laodicea and Hierapolis, too.

Our dear friends, Dr. Ruku and also Nokori, send greetings. Give my greetings to the beloved at Laodicea and to Ninfa (and the gathering of Jesus she hosts in her home). After this letter has been read to you, read it also to the gathering of Jesus in Laodicea and, also, that you read the letter from them. Oh, and tell Archippus: "Finish the job! Fulfill the service Imma entrusted to you."

I, Poru, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains and may Imma's loving-kindness be upon you, between you, and within you.

*Many names unknown  
calling from another time  
once beloved friends*

God, it's me. This final greeting sounds so normal, like a church newsletter or Sunday "joys and concerns." I am warmly inspired by their closeness. After experiencing how the Covacalypse fractured our sense of community, I no longer take such pleasantries for granted. I am chagrined I ever did.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word *apostoleos*, from which we get apostle, literally means sent one.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios* which means “set apart” and is often translated as “saints” or “holy ones.”

<sup>3</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word used is *Cosmos*, which denotes all creation.

<sup>5</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others.

<sup>6</sup> Poru used a string of three Greek words, all of which have connotations of strength or power: *dynamoumenoi*, *dynamei*, and *kratos*.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the power is connected to a purpose—so that.... The first Greek word used, *hypomonen*, conveys endurance or perseverance and the second word, *makrothymian* is a compound word meaning long—passion.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word used is *eikon*, which means “image,” as in a statue or representation of the thing itself (or the English word icon).

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word *prototokos* means first-born, which in the theological conversations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century Christianity, had a Greek philosophical sense of “nature” or “being” and conveys the sense that Jesus was created rather than eternal. However, Poru used the term first-born according to its 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish and Roman connotation, where a father (in the patriarchal household) entrusted the oldest son with both responsibility and authority to do the father’s will.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>11</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaosune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaosune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Pola’s theology. For Pola, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior 😊.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek word *agonizomenos* is usually translated as “strive” or “struggle.” I chose the verb agonize for the paraphrase in part because I have seen so many pastoral leaders agonize how to be the best pastor they can be for their congregations, especially

during COVID-19. Pastors, I seek to honor what I see in you with my choice of this verb and the poem that follows.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word used is *echo*, which has a connotation of “holding or possessing.”

<sup>14</sup> The Greek word used is *taxis*, which means “to order” or “to arrange.”

<sup>15</sup> *Eucharistia* is a variant of the Greek word for thanksgiving, used here as part of the paraphrase for its sacramental connotations.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek word Poru used is *kataoikei*, which is a cognate of *oikeo* with its rich connotations of residing, abiding, and home and is often translated as “dwells.” “Dwells” has a rich, biblical history, beginning with the stories of Israel’s Tabernacle (c.f. Exodus 26-27 ff.) in which the Lord’s presence was said to dwell. The “dwelling place of God” transitioned to the Solomonic Temple (c.f. 1 Kings 8 ff.) and later God’s presence “dwelled among us” in the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and promises to dwell in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23) among all people.

<sup>17</sup> *Nepesh* is the Hebrew word for spirit, breath and wind. It is not in the Greek text (obviously); however, I cite it to remind of the Jewish belief of the Spirit breathing life into creation, including humanity (c.f. Genesis 2:7).

<sup>18</sup> c.f. Matthew 27:37. Puro referred to the common practice of a Roman magistrate (e.g. Pilate) having the condemned one’s legal complaint inscribed above the cross.

<sup>19</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer’s Fire.” Rather than Dante’s “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word used, *synegerthete*, can be translated as raised, which would convey resurrection. However, the ordinary verb to convey the raising up of resurrection is *anastase*. By using *synegerthete*, which also can mean to rouse, Puro directed his thoughts not toward the eschatological hope of resurrection but toward the here-and-now hope of living life in a manner worthy as Abba’s beloved.

<sup>21</sup> Here is an example of an interpreter’s choice. The Greek word *hotan* can mean either “when” or “whenever.” To translate as when points to a single (and singular) event *when* Jesus will be seen (more on this in the next footnote). To translate as whenever suggests a continual process and abiding opportunity to see Jesus in the midst of daily life *whenever* our hearts and minds are set on things above. This is less of a linguistic question guided by grammatical rules—when or whenever—and more of a theological question guided by one’s understanding of how Jesus shows up in our lives: only later with a grand entrance or daily?

<sup>22</sup> The Greek word *phanerethe* is translated by the ESV as “appears,” which hints at the notion of the second advent of Jesus. However, *phanerethe* means “to make clear or to make visible.” While I do not doubt Jesus will be clear and visible at his

second advent, the Greek does not support an eschatological interpretation of this passage.

<sup>23</sup> c.f. Micah 6:8: “The Lord has shown you, human, what is required: to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

<sup>24</sup> The Greek word used is *anakaimenon*, which is either a middle or passive voice. The Greek language has three voices: active (I do), middle (You and I do together), and passive (I have done to me). While I suggest active voice steps above (e.g. delete porn, etc. as a friend), here and in the sentences below I convey the passive voice (Abba is crafting...), though this could as well have been paraphrased to convey the middle voice (e.g. You and Abba are a team working together). The choice to convey the passive voice rather than the middle voice, therefore, is more of a theological decision than a grammatical one.

<sup>25</sup> c.f. Genesis 1:27. *Imago dei* is a Latin phrase meaning image of God and is used by theologians to remind that all humankind bears the imprint of our Creator—no one is absented from receiving this gift.

<sup>26</sup> The Greek word *brabeneto* is often translated as “rule” yet also has the connotation of a “mediator, arbiter or umpire” in 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek culture. I seek to convey what it would sound like for the text to suggest that the peace of Jesus (see next footnote) should serve as the arbiter between us when there is conflict.

<sup>27</sup> The Greek word *eirene* is usually translated as “peace.” However, *eirene* also conveys the sense of “well-being or prosperity.” I seek to convey that it is that prosperity or well-being of Jesus that should serve as the arbiter of our decision-making when conflict exists between us. Rather than ask What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD), perhaps we should ask What Would Make Jesus Prosper? (WWMJP) or What Would Bring Jesus Well-Being? (WWBJW).

<sup>28</sup> A challenge in the current work regards how to convey the problematic (from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective) words of Colossians 3:18-25 (c.f. also Ephesians 5:21—6:9), which talks about husbands and wives, fathers and children, slaves and masters. This passage presents a choice for all intrepid paraphraser: focus more on translation or interpretation? Leaning toward translation inevitably grounds the text in the provisional, oppressive hierarchies of 1<sup>st</sup> century culture. Leaning toward interpretation seeks to apply the principles of Gospel truth to 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. I have chosen to lean into interpretation.

While leaning into interpretation in the paraphrase of this passage, I maintain the structural unity Poru uses. Colossians 3:18ff. is an example of a common literary form in Greek society, which scholars call “Household Ethics.” Every ethical teacher in 1<sup>st</sup> century society would have their version of household ethics (like today every preacher has a sermon series on The Ten Commandments or every politician an economic policy paper). What is striking about Poru’s version is that while it conforms structurally to what a 1<sup>st</sup> century reader would expect (addressing the relationships for husband/wife, father/child, master/slave), it radically and shockingly overturns the oppressive, often brutal and

capricious, hierarchies present in 1<sup>st</sup> century households. As such, Poru’s ethics were rejected by the prevailing culture. We fail to understand Poru well if we minimize how shocking his ethics sounded to the 1<sup>st</sup> century ear.

A comparison between Ephesians 5:21ff. and Colossians 3:18ff. shows they are similar in intent, but Colossians is briefer and contains less commentary about the imperative commands Poru makes. However, the brevity does not negate how shocking Poru’s ethics would have sounded in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>29</sup> These two sentences are not in the Colossians text but are found in Ephesians. In Colossians, Puro jumped straight to imperative commands to wives and husbands. The sentences are included here under the guise of interpretive paraphrase because mutual respect in human relationships was Puro’s guiding principle in both passages.

<sup>30</sup> The Greek text does not specifically address 3:25 toward Masters/Employers but reads, “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.” (NIV) Is an address to Masters/Employers implied here? I am uncertain. However, I link this sentence to the next, which specifically addresses Masters/Employers.

<sup>31</sup> The *mysterion* is not defined in Colossians with this much specificity. The specificity of the *mysterion*’s content is found in Ephesians 1:9-10 and 3:3-6.

<sup>32</sup> Poru is in and out of prison frequently in his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered. The Romans’ presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Pavel’s preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

<sup>33</sup> Poru returned to an earlier theme introduced in 1:26-27: the Uncovering, (the Greek word is *mysterion*, commonly translated as Mystery). In Ephesians (see note above) we learn that the precise nature of the Mystery uncovered in Jesus, which Poru proclaims, is the unity and oneness of all nations. I note here that this message is so embedded in our Western psyche that it is difficult for us to imagine how radical a thought this was in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Further, in the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, such a thought was seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered. The Romans’ presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Poru’s preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built.

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<sup>34</sup> The Greek word used is *perepeteite*, which means “walk,” and is where we get the English word peripatetic.

<sup>35</sup> The Greek word *parakalese* is usually translated as “encourage” but also connotes “invite, invoke or call.”

<sup>36</sup> The Greek text translates as “is one of you,” but one of what? Several possibilities exist: generally a Gentile, specifically a Colossian, a sibling in Jesus, and a slave. The lack of textual

evidence cautions me against leaping to the conclusion that Puro meant slave (an all-Gentile church in Colossae is more likely). However, my sacred imagination wonders about this possibility. How might we hear Puro’s letter differently if we knew it to refer to a collective of mostly slaves who had become Jesus followers?

<sup>37</sup> c.f. Genesis 32:24-28.



# PRAYING

## 1 THESSALONIANS

## 2 THESSALONIANS:

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

The relationship between 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians is a curious puzzle. The two letters share themes: a focus on Jesus' second advent and rules for life together in the Beloved community. The two letters share a common tone: Paul is a mother hen longing to bring her chicks under the protection of her wing. First Thessalonians is Paul's earliest letter, written circa 51 or 52 C.E. The question of when 2 Thessalonians was written is where the puzzle gets interesting.

Scholarly debate about the dating of 2 Thessalonians centers around what Paul says about the second advent. There is a clear distinction between the Thessalonian letters. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul says Jesus' second advent will come like "a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2-4): sudden and unexpected. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul provides an extended description of the prelude to the Day of Jesus that is the opposite of sudden and unexpected (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4). The accusation is that Paul is giving a mixed message.

Some scholars see in this mixed messaging evidence that 2 Thessalonians was written much later, perhaps as many as 50 years later. This scholarly debate may seem like an academic abstraction without connection to "real Christians" who "just want to read God's Word." I empathize.

Here is why I think it matters.

If 2 Thessalonians was written much later, we have two very different interpretations of what will happen on or around the time of Jesus' second advent—the mixed messaging creates confusion. If 2 Thessalonians was written several months or even only a year or so later, the mixed messaging may be understood as an extension of Paul's thinking rather than in opposition to Paul's thinking.

I find concerns about mixed messaging to be unconvincing. As a pastor, it is often the case that what I have said in a sermon or Bible study (or written in a newsletter) required follow-up conversation and further interpretation. Further, beyond the sharing of themes and tone noted above, the two letters both convey the same message about how Jesus' second advent should guide and direct Christian community. First Thessalonians 5:5-11 uses metaphorical language to convey a similar message to that found in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 about the appropriate, practical response for how to live. The two letters are not in *opposition* to one another but in *apposition* to one another—like a flower unfolding to reveal further beauty.

There is no inherent contradiction to an event being sudden yet with ample signs of its coming. Weddings and birth come to mind as happy examples of sudden yet with much planning. Market crashes and wars are unhappy examples of the same. That 2 Thessalonians is an appositional word simply means Paul's horizon expands and seeks to deepen the Thessalonians' insights, so they will not worry needlessly. It's what a good leader does.

It is because of this organic, interwoven, connection that exists between the two letters that I have chosen to present them together as *Praying 1 and 2 Thessalonians*. One can read (or preach a sermon series on) one of the letters without the other; however, I believe reading the letters together invites one to hear Paul's earliest message to a Christian community with greater depth and the potential for more insight.

Regarding Jesus' second advent, *Praying 1 and 2 Thessalonians* leans toward the interpretive side of "interpretive paraphrase." I found it necessary to provide explanation of 1<sup>st</sup> century cultural practices given the tsunami of misinformation that exists in Christian circles. You will find references to cultural practices embedded especially in the following passages: 1 Thessalonians 4:11-18 and 5:1-11 and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12 and 2:1-12.<sup>1</sup>

As readers of other work in the *Praying Paul* series know, my practice is to name the Apostle using a version of "Paul" from another culture. I find this practice helps me remain more open in thought and in spirit to hear Paul's message. In honor of the fact that Thessaloniki (as the city is called by modern Greeks) is in the heart of the region of Macedonia, I have called the Apostle Pola in the current work, which is a Macedonian translation. I should note that Pola is the feminine version of the Apostle's name. Having used Paula for *Praying Galatians*, for which the writing was more acerbic and the argument of Galatians more confrontational, I wanted to hear another female voice. Choosing Pola for the Thessalonian letters allowed me to balance Paula's confrontational tone with Pola's kind and encouraging one.

Pola loved the Thessalonians; her love for them drips from each page. Yet it is a love that is willing and able to speak clearly when necessary, to direct them to specific action, and even to command. It's what love does and what is found in both letters.

Brad Munroe  
July 2021

## 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Pola, Sheila and Tina, to those who belong to Abba and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar: loving-kindness and *shalom*<sup>2</sup> to you all.

We can't stop ourselves! Every morning, every night, and all day long: we pray for all of you. We remember<sup>3</sup> how you worked, labored, and even endured suffering. We remember your work led to trust, your labor yielded *agape*,<sup>4</sup> and your suffering generated hope in Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>5</sup> We remember, our beloved, that Abba himself called to you all before the beginning of time—y'all are chosen. We remember how the Good News story of Jesus strolled among you and sauntered about your lives. The Good News wasn't just words written on papyrus but *dunamis*<sup>6</sup> and the Divine Spirit, confidence and conviction of your belovedness.

We remember all this, and you remember how we lived among you as those seeking to bless, to strengthen, and to be your *paidagogos*<sup>7</sup> in Jesus. You mimicked everything we did, imitating us so that y'all could learn the Way of Jesus. The Good News message was not just words for you but action and lifestyle, and you welcomed all of it, despite intense suffering. You were amazing! Even amid suffering you opened your hearts and minds to the joy that comes through Abba's Divine Spirit.

Now, as we are *paidagogos* for you all, you all are *paidagogos* for all the gatherings<sup>8</sup> of Jesus both north and south.<sup>9</sup> Jesus' Good News radiates out from you all—your lives of trust in Abba are making you famous! Gatherings of Jesus' followers everywhere have heard how you welcomed us and how your lives turned inside-out. They have heard the stories of y'all letting go of useless images to embrace the One who breathes new creation into you. They know how y'all released destructive distractions to be embraced by the One who is truth incarnate in human form. They appreciate that you long for the Day that Jesus the Anointed will be unveiled—he whom Abba raised from death to life. Jesus, who delivered<sup>10</sup> us from the orgy<sup>11</sup> of desolation that approaches, will bring heaven with him when he comes.

*"Do this in remembrance of me."*

*Work so hard you have to trust.*

*Labor in ways that yield agape.*

*Allow your suffering to generate hope.*

*"Do this in remembrance of me."*

*Embrace the One who breathes new creation into you.*

*Be embraced by truth incarnate.*

*Long for the Day when heaven will be unveiled.*

God, it's me. Strengthen within me the connection between memory and hope. Show me the wisdom of looking back that I might strive forward. Give me the courage to move into a future that is defined by a past—your past, in which Death began to unwind and Desolation began to be replaced by justice and joy.

## 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You appreciate, beloved, that our visit to y'all produced fruit. Prior to our visit, we had been ridiculed shamelessly in the *agora*<sup>12</sup> in Philippi. Shouting heads in Philippi impugned our motives and wondered what kind of sophistry we were using to seduce our listeners. What they claimed was sophistry was that we dared to speak with clarity and humility (something rarely found in the *agora*). Our "seduction" was simply an invitation to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. Our antagonists in Philippi never imagined that Imma had chosen us for this work and she—and she alone—is the audience from whom we seek approval. They could not conceive that we would be entrusted by Imma with such Good News. You all know sweet talk is not our style and greed is not our motive. We know Imma is our witness as to how we conduct ourselves.

We were not seeking adulation but to fulfill our sacred calling as sent ones<sup>13</sup> when we came to you.<sup>14</sup> We have authority granted by Jesus the Anointed with which we could have compelled acceptance and demanded respect. We chose another way. We lived among you as young children and taught y'all the laughter of Imma's love. We cared for y'all as a nursing mother and nurtured within all y'all the joy of being found in Jesus. We cared so deeply, so earnestly, so longingly that we transferred ownership<sup>15</sup> of our hearts to you!

*Movie directors know*

*commercial directors know*

*news directors know*

*to seduce with camera angles*

*to seduce with mood lighting*

*to seduce with swelling music*

*I want to know  
how to speak with clarity and humility:  
seduction be damned.*

God, it's me. I thank you for the mysterious way our hearts get shared—the giving and taking, the tears and the laughter, the serving one another and together serving your world. I thank you for the joy I feel as I look back and wonder, “When did I transfer ownership of my heart to them?” I may not know when it happened but am confident it did. And I know how it happened: you made us one, sharing with you in holy communion, becoming a holy community for the sake of sharing a holy compassion with the world. Thank you, Imma, thank you!

### 1 Thessalonians 2:9-16

You remember, beloved, our long hours of working during the day so we could share with you our hearts at night. You remember our desire to free you from the responsibility to care for our earthly needs so that we could bring you a heavenly message—Abba's Good News for you all. You remember (and no doubt can testify in the Heavenly Courts) how we were set apart<sup>16</sup> for this work, how we sought to build right relationships,<sup>17</sup> and how we conducted ourselves with integrity among all who trusted in Jesus—our lives shining clear in the light of the sun.<sup>18</sup> You remember that we treated each of you as a father with his children. We called you to comfort and together comforted one another. We called you to courage as those who walk the Way of Jesus. We reminded you that Abba himself calls you into his kin-dom and desires for you to reflect the light of his love into the world.

As we remember all that has transpired between us—indeed, because we remember these things—we give thanks to Abba. Even more, we cannot stop giving thanks because when we spoke the Good News to you, with clarity and humility, you came alongside<sup>19</sup> our message and strolled with us in its truth. You sauntered beside our words long enough that you perceived them for what they actually are: Abba's Word. And then together we threw a “Welcome Home!” party,<sup>20</sup> as our words—Abba's Word—came to dwell in your minds and hearts and then seep deep within your spirits and down into the marrow of your soul. Abba's Word now does its work of transformation within you all and between you all.

All of you, our beloved, have become imitators of the gatherings in Jesus that populate Jerusalem and its surrounding countryside. You suffered (and continue to suffer) at the hands of your own people, just as the gatherings in Judea suffer at the hands of their own people. It was religious folk who provoked Jesus' passion—his trial and conviction, his judgment and execution. Such pious people antagonize all who do not conform to their narrow vision of Abba's purpose. They seek to silence our telling of the Good News of what Abba has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus. They seek to stifle Abba's loving-kindness in Jesus. They seek to save themselves while gleefully condemning all others to *Sheol*.<sup>21</sup> They seek these things but will not succeed. Indeed, they will only succeed in stoking the purging fires<sup>22</sup> of Abba's justice.

*I don't want to be that kind of “religious.”  
I pray I won't lose compassion in the name of Jesus.*

*How do we religious folk lose our way?  
I pray I won't lose myself while following The Way.*

*Abba, let your Word dwell within me.  
I pray it will do its deep work of transformation.*

God, it's me. I confess I prefer not to suffer. I desire the comfort and courage to which Pola refers—but really am not that interested in suffering. And I certainly do not want to suffer at the hands of religious folk (like myself). How have we come to this as the people of Jesus? How did we lose our way, his way? Abba, I welcome your Word into my life! I pray it will find a good home within me. May your Word do its work of transformation. You know how much I need it (and how much we need it).

### 1 Thessalonians 2:17 - 3:5<sup>23</sup>

Beloved, being ripped away from you all felt like bereavement,<sup>24</sup> as if we were now orphans who had lost their parents. We longed to see you in person (y'all were always in our prayers) and worked overtime to make that happen. (Certainly I, Pola, yearned to see you face-to-face and was constantly eager for it to happen. The Accuser has created an obstacle course that, so far, has hindered our efforts.) We all yearn to see you for y'all are the source of our confidence that we are accomplishing Imma's purpose.

You are the source of our joy in fulfilling Imma's purpose. You are our victor's garland, as if we are victorious Olympians, returning to shouts of acclamation! Only the shouts are not for us but for Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar. When he returns, we will point to you as our crowning achievement. You bear our reflection and bring us joy.

Since the Accuser hindered us for longer than we could endure (for not seeing you face-to-face was unbearable), we decided to send Tina (who is a wonderful sister and brings great synergy to the work of sharing Jesus) to give you courage enough to continue trusting. We sent her so that you would not be rattled by the opposition that confronts you and will continue to confront you. We sent her to remind you all that the Way of Jesus is no downhill slide upon the summer grass but often an uphill climb over rocks and past ravines, with vermin that nip at our ankles and weeds that bury our knees. We told you all this would come our way, and it did, but were concerned it might overwhelm you when it came your way. When I<sup>25</sup> was about to burst with concern, I sent Tina to learn if you still trusted in Imma's love. I feared the Accuser who hindered us would consume you and that our victor's garland would be just a weed hanging upon our ears.

*Worry  
Fool's errand!  
I can't stop!!  
I must do something!!!  
Trust:<sup>2</sup>*

God, it's me. I recognize Pola's concern. I hear it in the voices of parents talking about their young children and adult children talking about their parents. I hear it in the voices of pastors talking about their churches and elders talking about their pastors. I hear it in conversations churches have about their neighbors—just not often enough. Imma, in your mercy, hear our prayer of confession and repentance. Help us incarnate our concern by expressing them as acts of love.

### 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Tina just now has come to us bringing the joyous report of your continuing trust in Abba's love and continual sharing of his *agape* with one another and with all. She told us y'all remember us and yearn also to see us face-to-face.

This is good news! This is a happy report! Oh, our<sup>26</sup> beloved, in the heartache that accompanies our suffering for doing Abba's work in the world we now know a healing balm. Your trusting of Abba gives courage to our hearts. We were holding our breath awaiting news from Tina; now we can breathe again knowing you stand<sup>27</sup> with Abba and stand for him. How can we thank Abba enough for the joy we experience in him because of you?

Every morning, every night, and all day long: we pray for all of you. We pray that we will see you face-to-face and be able to pay forward the courage and joy you have instilled in our hearts. Whatever you need to walk the Way of Jesus and to trust in Abba's love, that's what we want to give to you and so that's how we pray! Are you listening, Abba? We want to see our beloved—no uphill slog, no rocks nor ravines nor vermin nipping at our ankles, just a straight, smooth path back to our beloved.

We know Abba hears our prayers. We are confident he who chose, claimed, and wooed all y'all to his bosom will increase your *agape* until it overflows every cup, runs off every table, and fills your whole house. As our love for you is always full, we are confident Abba keeps your love whole and complete for each other, for us, and for all whom you encounter. May he give courage to your hearts so that you may conduct yourselves with integrity among all people—your lives shining clear in the light of the sun. May he who set you apart from the broken values of this world and set you apart for the work of his new creation give you the assurance of his loving-kindness. May he prepare you for the Day when you will stand with all his people whom he has called to himself. That Day will be a joyous parade—shouts of acclamation resounding to highest heaven—and Jesus will lead us all.

*Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang.  
A different time, a different parade:  
foreshadowing, prelude, origin story.*

*Hosanna in the highest, the ancient song we sing.  
Christ is our Redeemer, the Lord of heaven our King:  
fulfillment, sequel, the final chapter.*

God, it's me. Teach me the joy of coming to you with my worries. Give me another lesson in, "Brad, stop it! I've got this!!" Show me the folly of my ways. Help me to channel my worry into trust and my anxiety into action, even if the action is remaining still.

## 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10

Moving forward, beloved, we have already given you the method for living that will bring Imma joy. You know it, do it, and live it. Keep on keeping on!

As a reminder, let me summarize what we told you: Imma's design for you is not just that you all would be forgiven but that y'all would continually grow into the truth his mercy expresses. That is, don't just have the guilt and penalty of your actions taken away but have your true self begin to mirror Imma's trust in you. Imma has claimed you as one of her own children—act accordingly. Day by day make choices that shape your character and produce virtue. Moment by moment live ever deeper into *agape*. Do these things for Imma has set you apart from the broken values of avarice, betrayal and corruption and set you apart for *agape* and justice and joy.

Here is a first step: hold every relationship as a sacred trust, especially intimate relationships. Do not treat each other as meat to consume, with your lust the fire that sears and scars another. Know that you, too, are scarred even if you do not feel the branding that occurs in your soul. Do not oppress one another for the gratification of your lust—force and power have no place in the bedroom. Indeed, Imma herself will champion the cause<sup>28</sup> of those who are sexually abused or oppressed. Imma has called us to integrity—literally to integrate our character with our conscience, our attitudes with our actions, the expressions from our lips an extension of our minds, hearts, and spirits. Integrity will make you shine clear in the light of the sun! If you don't like what I am saying, take your complaint to Imma, for this is not my suggestion but Imma's instruction. Imma gave you her Divine Spirit to help you live with such integrity. You got this. You can do it. Keep on keeping on!

Regarding Imma's design that we are set apart for *agape* and justice and joy, here is a second step: love one another with *adelphia*—may Thessalonki be known as the City of Brotherly Love.<sup>29</sup> Now I know you love each other already, just as Imma taught you. Indeed, you love all of Imma's family throughout Macedonia. Don't stop now. Continue your journey deeper and deeper into the heart of her love. Keep on keeping on!

*Moment by moment.*

*Step by step.*

*Day by day.*

*Choice by choice.*

*Breath by breath.*

*Damn!*

*Forming the divine image within takes a long time.*

*Becoming like Jesus is for the brave of heart.*

God, it's me. I pray for my sisters who are targets of male lust; also for the men who have given themselves over to their false self. I pray for all who have been sexually abused; also for the systems who have protected abusers from accountability. I pray for children and youth whose attitudes and character are being formed today; also for a culture of oppression that uses sexuality to sell products and manipulate attitudes. I pray that words such as sacred and trust might come to define our relationships, especially our most intimate ones; also for my own self, that I would be an example—may my integrity shine clear in the light of the sun.

## 1 Thessalonians 4:11-18

Strenuously seek stillness. Be zealous in assertive contemplation,<sup>30</sup> for then you will be centered in Jesus and prepared to live well. Work hard, keep your nose clean, and take care of your own business—no slacking in the kingdom! Don't make others in the gathering carry your load just because you think Jesus will return any moment now.<sup>31</sup>

Beloved, we don't want you to have to be agnostic<sup>32</sup> about what comes next. Many beloved sleep; that is, they have died. We know you grieve their loss from among you, as you should! But we do not want you to grieve like those who do not have the confidence that comes from knowing Abba. Don't grieve like those who cannot trust with sure and certain expectation that the dead can live again. We trust that Jesus died and rose again and that when Jesus returns—his second advent—Abba will lead our beloved to follow Jesus into life eternal.

Jesus told us what it will be like. It will be like when a Roman general or some other "great man" enters a city.<sup>33</sup> In the same way that throngs of people go out from the city to meet the great man, so we who are alive will go to meet Jesus (whether in body or in spirit I cannot say). Likewise, in the same way the throngs accompany the great man as he enters the city, so we who are alive will accompany Jesus to the place of his eternal rule. Heaven will come to earth, and we will all be together with Jesus—we who are still alive with those who have fallen asleep.

Like the trumpet blast calling an army to battle, so we will be roused from our slumber, and the voice of the archangel will rouse all the heavenly host. Upon Jesus' command, all of our beloved who have fallen asleep will awaken and, in fact, get to be with Jesus before us! Then, when the *kairos*<sup>34</sup> arrives, we will join the celebration—it will be a party that never ends. Speak these words to each other's hearts and make each other courageous.

*Rapturous, yes.*

*Rapture, no.*

*Heavenly design descending to the earthly plane, yes.*

*Planes without pilots, no.*

*All who are called and chosen being carried, yes.*

*No one left behind.*

God, it's me. I long for Jesus' second advent! I like to think I know what it will be like—and bet my life I'm wrong about it. I like to believe I can imagine what it will be like—and strongly suspect I'm fooling only myself. Abba, as I long for the Day when I get to see Jesus face-to-face (in this life or in the age to come), make me equally desirous for that meeting to go well, that I will not be ashamed, that I will be able to stand as one who stood for Jesus.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Beloved, regarding what comes next, we don't need to write to y'all about *chronos* and *kairos*. You all know well that curiosity about the *chronos* of Jesus' second advent is a fool's game played by those with idle minds and wandering hearts. You all know well the *kairos* will happen when we least expect it, like a thief sneaking into a home while the family sleeps or like the woman whose labor pains lead her to exclaim, "It's time!" Those who slumber in apathy will be startled and those who snooze in arrogance will be surprised. While some say, "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace, and others ask, "What do you mean Imma wanted justice?" so Imma will send Jesus to enact new creation. All that has no place in the kin-dom will be ruined. Only what belongs to Imma will remain. Given that we know neither the *chronos* nor the *kairos* of Jesus' second advent, let us all behave accordingly.

Beloved, you are children of light for you walk with Imma—it is always day wherever you are. Be who you are. Neither the night nor the darkness is the boss of you. You need not do its bidding. Be who you are.

As children of the light who walk in the day, you are not to slumber with apathy nor snooze in arrogance. The night brings shadows and uncertainty, but you are to be free of illusions<sup>35</sup> regarding what the God-life requires. Therefore, clothe yourselves with trust and love as a bulletproof vest. Don the protective helmet of good confidence that Imma has chosen you to be new creation. Wear these in the world and be confident that Imma's design for you is wholeness—the becoming of your true self. Imma did not choose you in order to make you suffer! Rather, suffering that brings new creation was carried by Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. Jesus died that we may live the God-life, in body and in spirit, now and into the age to come, all of us together. Speak these words to each other's hearts and make each other courageous (as I know you are already doing).

*Thessalonians came first.*

*"Jesus died that we might live."*

*Simple, straight forward.*

*Corinthians came later.*

*"Jesus became sin that*

*we might become the righteousness of God."*<sup>36</sup>

*Depth leaning into mystery.*

*Philippians came later still.*

*"Jesus emptied himself."*<sup>37</sup>

*Mystery sounding like a symphony.*

*Abba, give me a simple, straight forward faith,  
unafraid of your depths,  
learning to play in your symphony.*

God, it's me. I want to live free of illusions, so I confess my privilege that too easily blinds me to the plight of others. I confess my insecurities that too often prevent me from listening to the Story of others' lives. I confess my hard-heartedness that too often and too easily has me believe life is about me and that I am the center of the universe. Forgive me, Abba. Give me eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart

that cares, that I might walk in the light as a child of the light, as your child.

## 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Now, beloved, let me conclude this missive with a hodgepodge of advice—five, smooth stones that will help you win the battle against the forces of darkness. First, appreciate the hard workers among you all, especially those who lead the gathering and even more those who must guide and direct others with gentle rebuke. Leadership that loves enough to care about others' walking as children of the light is difficult work. Such leaders should be respected and offered *agape*.

Second, live in peace with each other. Let the Divine Spirit speak through each of you and to all of you, each of you nurturing the *shalom* of the entire gathering. Those who are ornery and idle, get a life! "Don't be a hater" is not just a saying but a virtue for living together in community. Replace ornery with understanding and idleness with activity that is a balm for those whose hearts grieve. Excel in patience, abound in persistence, and endure with perseverance in creating good for one another and in one another. Rather than seeking revenge, search for ways to restore your *agape* toward each other to its rightful place—in the center of your life together as a gathering of Jesus' beloved.

Third, experience the love of Abba as a gift.<sup>38</sup> Allow Abba's love to dwell in your hearts; may the divine *agape* abide in your hearts and make it home. From the place of this abiding, be thankful—always!

Fourth, because you experience Abba's love as a gift, turn to him in prayer—never stopping! In all times, in all places, for every situation, sing thanksgiving and seek the God-rhythms that have been taught to you in Jesus the Anointed, for Abba's design for your lives is found in them.

Fifth, don't fear the flames of the Divine Spirit, for the heat of passion that causes you to confront injustice is ignited by them; these flames kindle your *agape* so need not be doused. The same is true for the way you treat the truth-tellers among y'all. Don't just reject what they say as inconvenient: test it. Examine the truth-tellers' words according to what belongs to Abba's Word. Listen for what leads you deeper into the Way of Jesus and what does not. Hold on to what is good and just and true, and release everything else that it may not find a place in your hearts.

May Abba himself cause you to grow more and more to reflect his image—the image of *shalom*. May Abba himself cause your entire person—your spirit, soul and body—to be surrounded by angels until Jesus' second advent and so to preserve his image within you. The One who calls y'all to his own bosom is trustworthy—he's got this and will do it!

Beloved, pray for us. Greet Abba's chosen and beloved with sacred embrace. My charge to you is this: read<sup>39</sup> this letter to all the beloved. May the loving-kindness of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar, make a home within your hearts and minds.

### *Five Smooth Stones:*

***Respect:*** appreciation, acceptance, and obedience—  
*may the leaders among you not regret their sacred calling.*

***Reconciliation:*** mercy, forgiveness, and confession—  
*may your life together embrace a cruciform<sup>40</sup> spirituality.*

***Rejoicing:*** joy, gratitude, and thanksgiving—  
*may the attitude of gratitude resound for all to hear!*

***Remembering:*** pray, pray, and pray—  
*may stillness expand your insight, assurance and love!*

***Renunciation:*** fire, flames, and inferno—  
*may the Spirit purge you of evil that only good remains.*

God, it's me. As a preacher, I understand the temptation to offer a concluding thought (or two). I have committed the offense of saying during a sermon, "And finally....," only to continue. As concluding thoughts go, Pola just dumped a whole barrel full of wisdom my way. This is more than a bit of helpful advice but source material for a five-part sermon series! Where should I start? All of this is so good, so needful in my life. Abba, help me carry each "smooth stone" with me wherever I go. For starters, I'll focus on....

## 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Pola, Sheila, and Tina to the gathering in Thessaloniki, in northern Greece, to those found in Imma our mother and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar: loving-kindness and *shalom* to all y'all from

Imma our mother and Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above Caesar.

Gratitude is our sacred obligation when we think of you all, beloved, for your trust in Imma grows more and more and the *agape* you share with one another thrives amidst your suffering. Indeed, we sing your praises to all the gatherings of those who have been chosen by Imma and who belong to Jesus. We tell of your patient and perseverant trust in the face of mockery and malice.<sup>41</sup> The Greeks accuse you of unspeakable sins: of cannibalism and atheism. The Romans accuse you of sedition and are wary that your *koinonia*<sup>42</sup> (that breaks down the dividing wall of hostility between people) is a ruse used to plan revolt. In the face of these attacks, you stand<sup>43</sup> firm in the faith.

*Gratitude  
sacred obligation  
overwhelmed with thanksgiving  
diving deep into joy  
appreciation*

God, it's me. I thank you for my churches who show patient and perseverant trust. We are not persecuted as the early Christians were persecuted, but the currents of culture run against us. In an era when we seem irrelevant to broad swaths of the population, we stand for a love that crosses aisles and breaks down barriers. In an age when our behavior may elicit hostility, we stand with those who cannot speak for themselves. Today we stand, seeking justice for all and offering the hope that in Jesus all things are being made new. Imma, I thank you for all that we have, for it is all because of your life among us. Gratitude is a sacred obligation that I am pleased to honor.

## 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12

Your trust and *agape* amidst suffering are signs that Abba's decision is just and right and true—he declared you worthy of his kin-dom, and so you are. He is just: Equity will be the order of the Day. Relief and rest will come to those who have been afflicted; to the Troubler will come trouble. All this will happen when Jesus, unveiled, brings heaven to earth, when he and his heavenly messengers unleash a purifying fire.<sup>44</sup>

All those who cannot appreciate<sup>45</sup> the God-life will have their decision honored. All those who cannot dance to the God-rhythms will be allowed to “sit this one out.” Only there is no sitting in the kin-dom; only those who stand with Abba will be allowed to remain in his dance hall. All others will be escorted out, not allowed to celebrate what they cannot appreciate.<sup>46</sup> We who remain will be led in dance by Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar, and we will be filled with wonder and reverence and awe. This means all y'all, too! You will be there because you trusted our witness and learned to dance the God-rhythms and appreciate the God-life.

Remembering that a joyous Feast in Abba's kin-dom awaits us, we pray for y'all—never stopping! We pray Abba will continue his work of shaping you into the “you” that he sees you will become. We pray his *dunamis* will cause the full flowering of you true selves. We pray that your becoming will be expressed moment-by-moment, day-by-day, and year-after-year by what you do and how you do it, by what you say and how you say it. We pray all of this so that the character of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, will be reflected in you and that you will be a part of him. May the loving-kindness of Abba and Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above Caesar, make it so.

*Halloween Dance 1980.*

*I was sixteen and with friends.*

*Jay, Brad, Jeff, Norm and both Erins also went to a dance.  
At the Catholic Church.*

*We were all dressed up, of course.*

*Costumes broke down barriers.*

*Awkward adolescence faded with face paint and funny hats.  
And then “Church” happened.*

*No one-to-one pairings.*

*No hyper-sexualized meat market.*

*All dancing together in a circle.*

*All dancing as one.*

*We Were “All Out of Love.”<sup>47</sup>*

*Just “Working My Way Back to You.”*

*Feeling like “Another Brick in the Wall” but*

*Looking for “A Crazy Little Thing Called Love.”*

*Dancing as a foretaste of heaven.*

God, it's me. Like many others, I wrestle with what to think about judgment and The End. I admit I am uncomfortable both with God's-going-to-enjoy-punishing-you Hellfire and who-cares-we're-all-good universalism. I hear Pola proclaiming a middle way—filled with grace yet demanding truth, offering love yet allowing its refusal. Hmmm. While I continue to wonder and ponder on such things, help me also to focus on today: loving my neighbor, pursuing justice, being a cog in creating shalom, praying for friends and enemies and for neighbors and strangers. Abba, may I not be so heavenly minded that I am no earthly good.

## 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Now let me set the record straight about the second advent of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. (We do not want you all to scurry about like anxious chickens, clucking and strutting to no affect.) The report we have heard is that someone brought to you a teaching that was allegedly from us but was not. This alleged teaching from us said the second advent had already occurred. We don't know how this alleged teaching came to you, whether by spiritual rumor or gossip or our names forged in a letter, but you should find peace in knowing it was not from us. You haven't missed anything—the Day of Jesus is still to come.

Let no one's smooth speech manipulate you. The Day of Jesus will not come without opposition. Rebellion against Imma will be all the rage at that time. Everything that belongs to Imma will be challenged and wickedness exalted. Virtue will be called vile and malice considered moral. The Man of Anarchy (whom some call the Man of Lawlessness, the Man of Sin or the Antichrist<sup>48</sup>) will exalt himself. Whether this is an individual or the way of humanity as the Day approaches matters not; only that you rest assured that all of you belong to Imma and should live accordingly.

We have talked about this before—when I was with you and in an earlier letter.<sup>49</sup> Now you can rest assured that the powers of darkness that pursue the children of light are being restrained until the moment<sup>50</sup> Imma has chosen for all heaven to break loose. The Man of Anarchy (and his minions) are already at work—always have been and will continue until Imma says, “Enough!” When that moment set by Imma arrives, all lawlessness will be unhooded; every cruelty revealed. In that moment, lawlessness itself will be

silenced by the Breath of Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, and its influence become flaccid.

You will be able to recognize the Man of Anarchy's advent because it will look and sound and feel like all the ways the Accuser works: lots of blather and bluster to support “The Lie,” flashing dollar signs to secure credibility, preaching a message of “**Might Makes Right**,” and seeking in everything to deceive. And many will be deceived, especially those who delight in anarchy rather than seek the truth discovered only through Imma's *agape*. Imma will permit<sup>51</sup> them to wander<sup>52</sup> about as they seek their delight in their false self.

*Anarchy storms*

*within, without*

*destroying the guardrails of virtue*

*Jesus' Breath calms the storms*

*within, and sometimes even without*

*loosing Imma's shalom*

God, it's me. The first Christian book I ever read was about the End Times—scared the bejeebers out of me. The “Antichrist” was identified: Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt. Sadat was assassinated two months after I finished reading that book (and I believe these two things are unrelated). I learned then not to worry about the antichrist but about who I am becoming in you. I am still becoming, Imma, still a work in progress. Yet I take great comfort in knowing that when trouble comes, you walk beside me (and behind and before me, above and below me). Help me continue the journey as you craft the image of Jesus within me. May I reflect Jesus' image to all whom I meet. It's long a journey, and I have a way to go. I thank you I do not go alone.

## 2 Thessalonians 2:13 – 3:5

Gratitude is indeed our sacred obligation, beloved in Abba, for he chose for you all to be the firstfruits of those who were wooed into the God-life. All y'all are the first of Abba's harvest; the first to begin the journey toward becoming whole and complete, your true selves. Your becoming is a partnership between the work of the Divine Spirit upon you, within you, and through you and your own

trust in Abba's truth. Abba invited you through the message of Good News and then summoned<sup>53</sup> you to participate in a wondrous work: to reflect into the world the image of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.

And so, beloved, embrace what we have taught y'all about the God-life; cling with desperation to the holy habits that make you able to dance the God-rhythms. It matters not whether we have taught you in person or by letter; only that you practice, practice, practice all that you have learned. May Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above Caesar, and Abba, whose *agape* embraces us with loving-kindness, speak courage into your hearts and make y'all unwavering in your pursuit of justice and joy.

Finally, beloved, pray for us. Pray that the Good News message will run with abandon through the regions to which Abba has appointed them. Pray the message will be welcomed as worthy of consideration and then acceptance, just as it was so honored among you. Pray that we will be rescued from children of anarchy who will never learn the blessings of trusting Abba. Pray in the assurance that Abba is trustworthy and will confirm his trustworthiness<sup>54</sup> by making you resolute and able to stand against the Accuser. Pray knowing that we believe in you! Or, I should say, we have confidence that Abba is working in you and will continue this work. Abba will make your hearts "straight edge"<sup>55</sup> and enable all y'all to practice with perseverance the holy habits we have taught you.

*Trust and obey: believing leads to doing  
Our heart expressed through our hands.*

*Obey and trust: doing shapes believing  
Our hands opening us to the need of our heart.*

*Which comes first: trust or obedience, obedience or trust?  
And the answer is...*

*Yes.*

*God, it's me. Help me be both a Hearer of the Word  
and a Doer of the Word. Help me to read and reflect  
first and then be a person of action: ready to reflect  
Jesus to the world, willing to express agape to both  
neighbors and strangers, able to do so with a glad  
and generous heart.*

## 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Beloved, we implore you all in the name of Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above Caesar, to shy away from everyone who says they follow Jesus but is unwilling to contribute to the well-being of the Body.<sup>56</sup> We taught you good order and to live with discipline so that everyone will contribute to the good of all. This was the example we taught you and lived among you: Follow our example.

We worked long hours among you and gladly paid for the food we ate. Night and day we labored; day and night we toiled to avoid being a financial hardship to you all. We had the right to expect you all to provide for us as we served among you, but we desired to give you an example to imitate: Work hard! Indeed, we even gave you a rule to follow: "If you are able to work but unwilling, you shall not eat."

We remind you all of this rule because we hear that some within your gathering are saying, "Jesus will return soon. Why worry about the harvest? It's too much work!" Those who say this are insubordinate to the Divine Spirit and break ranks with their commander, Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar. They need to silence the urges of their false self and get busy contributing to the well-being of the Body. Beloved, if you want to eat, let no fatigue stop you from doing Imma's good. Notice those who are able but unwilling to work and stop hanging out with them—let them feel the sting of social rebuke. Don't treat them as enemies, of course, but speak the truth in love to them, for they are your beloved in Jesus.

Now may Imma's *shalom* make your hearts sing wherever you go. May the presence of the Divine Spirit reside and abide within you always. May the loving-kindness of Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar, continue your journey toward becoming whole and complete, your true selves.

I, Pola, write this greeting and not my scribe. (This is how you know it's me.)

*The Couch whispers  
all plush and comfy  
enticing me to descend into somnambulance.*

*The Game cajoles  
exciting the pulse  
exhorting me to energetically avoid every responsibility.*

*The Pastor stands  
behind the communion table  
pleading for help for those broken by a hurricane in Haiti.*

*The Child waits  
squirming and smiling at her desk  
inviting me to help her read her new favorite book.*

*To which voice will I attend?  
What will I do?  
Who will I be?*

God, it's me. Not working hard is not my problem. Rather than idleness, I confess my sin of not observing Sabbath. Rather than sloth, I confess my sin of using work to distance myself from neighbors in need. Rather than laziness, I confess my sin of using work to place myself above those without the stamina to endure a soul-crushing work week (and I call them slackers in the secret places in my heart). Imma, forgive me. Imma, free me from the bondage to my sin by teaching me a godly rhythm of "work-life balance."

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Ken Bailey for his insights into ancient cultural practices that helped me sort through our 21<sup>st</sup> century misinformation regarding Paul's actual message about the second advent.

<sup>2</sup> *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and conveys not merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of economic, social, and physical wholeness and wellness for all.

<sup>3</sup> In this passage, Pola twice repeated variants of two different Greek words: *mnemoneuo*, from which we get the English word "mnemonic," and *eido*, which can mean "to know, to remember, or to appreciate." While most Bibles translate *eido* as know, I am intrigued by Pola's pairing *eido* with *mnemoneuo*. Even more, I am intrigued by the power of remembering as a spiritual practice and so lean into this connotation for the paraphrase.

<sup>4</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others.

<sup>5</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus' authority as above Caesar's authority.

<sup>6</sup> Here I paraphrase the Greek with the Greek. *Dunamis* is the Greek word meaning power, from which we get the English words dynamic and dynamite.

<sup>7</sup> c.f. Galatians 3:24. In Greek culture, a *paidagogos* refers to a tutor or mentor for the children of a 1st-century Hellenistic family. Technically, the *paidagogos* was responsible for moral and educational training.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek text says Macedonia, which is northern Greece, and Achaia, which is southern Greece.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek verb is in the middle or passive voice. In Greek there are three voices: active—I do; middle—you and I do together; and passive—I have done to me. I have leaned into the passive voice in the paraphrase.

<sup>11</sup> The Greek word Pola used is *orges*, which means "violent passion." I hesitated to use the word orgy because of its sexual connotations, but it seems the Greek word (and its English cousin) provoke helpful insight into how graphic Pola's language is in this verse.

<sup>12</sup> The *agora* was the town square in Greek communities in which philosophers taught and the marketplace of ideas could be debated. The "suffering" and "opposition" to which Pola referred in this passage seems to have been associated with their experience in the *agora*.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word *apostoleos*, from which we get apostle, literally means sent one.

<sup>14</sup> A reminder to readers that the original Greek text did not have pagination and paragraphs (nor chapters and verses, which were added after the Gutenberg Press was invented in 1450). In most English Bibles, there is no paragraph separation between 2:2-5 and 2:6ff. In 2:2-5, Pola recounted their hostile reception in Philippi, a Roman Colony, at the Greek *agora*. However, in 2:6ff. Pola returned to his original thought from 2:1 to discuss their visit to the Thessalonians. It would be odd for Pola to claim Jewish apostleship (2:6) as affirmation of her rights to speak in the Philippian *agora* (2:2-5). Rather, Pola moved back to her original line of thought. What is interesting to me, as a reader of Scripture and an interpreter, is to remember that ancient letters were not first written but spoken, with a scribe transcribing. The pattern seen here in chapter 2 conforms to how humans speak rather than write—back and forth rather than in a linear direction. The sensitive reader/interpreter accounts for this pattern.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek word *matadounai* is often translated as "share" but literally means "offer so that a change of owner is produced" (Strongs: 3330).

<sup>16</sup> The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as "holy" and literally means "set apart"—both set apart from and set apart for.

<sup>17</sup> The Greek word used is *dikaiosune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaiosune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in Pola's theology. For Pola, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior 😊.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek word used, *akatharios*, means "impure" and is taken from *katharios*, which is idiom for "shines clear in the light of the sun" in 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek culture.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek word *paralabontes*, often translated as "receive," has a connotation of "coming near or allowing to come close."

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word *edexasthe* means "to accept or receive" but also carries the connotation of "to welcome."

<sup>21</sup> The reference to *Sheol* is not in the Greek text, though I suggest it is implied. *Sheol* is a shadowy underworld referred to in the Hebrew Bible and is the Jewish counterpart to the Greek concept of Hades, though not quite as "hellish" as its Greek cousin.

<sup>22</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the "Redeemer's Fire." Rather than Dante's "fire as punishment," the biblical metaphor

for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>23</sup> This passage is a good example of the fickleness of biblical chapters and verses. The story of how chapter and verse became a part of the Bible originates after the invention of the Gutenberg press. An editor, seeking a marketing advantage for his translation of Scripture, decided to add in chapters and verses (and did a decent job with it). He placed marks upon the manuscript as notations while traveling by carriage from Paris to Rome (where he hoped to secure Papal patronage for his “new” version of the Bible). The joke among scholars is that the editor sometimes placed an errant mark when the carriage hit a pothole, leading to some awkward transitions. This passage is an example of such an awkward transition as Pola’s concern that began in 2:17ff. continued into 3:1ff and did not conclude until at least 3:8 or, arguably, 3:13.

<sup>24</sup> The Greek word *aporphanisthetes* means “to be bereaved” but is derived from *orphanos* meaning “orphan.”

<sup>25</sup> Note the way Pola moved in the Greek text from “we” to “I,” as if she was trying to be inclusive and speak for her ministry partners Sheila and Tina as she dictated the letter to a scribe, but finally could not contain her emotions and burst into the first-person singular.

<sup>26</sup> See the note above and notice that Pola returned to “we.” I wonder if Sheila and Tina were standing next to Pola as she dictated the letter, as if letter writing was a community event. In my sacred imagination, I wonder if Sheila and Tina raised their eyebrows at Pola when she burst into the first-person singular, as if to inquire, “Hey, what about us?”

<sup>27</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, “Who can stand?” This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, “Who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

<sup>28</sup> “Champion the cause” (usually of a city in 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek culture) is the literal meaning of the Greek word *ekdikos*. English Bibles translate *ekdikos* as punish or avenge, which is linguistically appropriate, but I wonder what it means if we change the frame of reference a bit from focusing Abba’s concern against the perpetrator and placing his concern for the victim—literally becoming the victim’s champion.

<sup>29</sup> Shout out to Philadelphia, for *adelphia* is one of the Greek words that translates as love, with the connotation of a sisterly or brotherly love. The next reference to love Pola used is *agape* love.

<sup>30</sup> Pola used two, contrasting words in succession: *philoteleisthai* *heschazein*, which mean “to be zealous” and “still,” respectively. Usually this verse is translated as “lead a quiet life,” which I feel misses Pola’s energy and focus through blandness.

<sup>31</sup> This verse is sometimes used as a cudgel with which to beat those who require family or governmental assistance. “Why don’t they work, like Pola told the Thessalonians?” Such a question is a serious misinterpretation of this verse and ignores the wide array of circumstances that lead the unemployed and underemployed to need support. Pola seems to be addressing a specific situation in the Thessalonian gathering in which congregants were not working because of their belief in the imminent 2<sup>nd</sup> advent of Jesus. To generalize this verse to all people and every situation distorts the message. One of the reasons I divided the verses as I did, putting 4:11-12 with 4:13ff, is to show the context for Pola’s admonition is his wider conversation about eschatology (the end times).

<sup>32</sup> The Greek word used *agnoein*, from which we get the English word “agnostic,” is usually translated as “uninformed.”

<sup>33</sup> Two examples of the cultural phenomenon depicted in this paragraph can be found in Luke 19 in the stories of Zaccheus (19:1-10) and the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (19:28-40). The 1<sup>st</sup> century recipients of this letter would have heard Pola’s metaphoric use of this cultural practice in ways we find difficult to catch. The modern concept of “The Rapture” comes from this passage but is a modern, speculative insertion upon the text; what some refer to as eisegesis. Rather than being carried away into heaven with Jesus, the passage actually portrays that we will accompany Jesus to earth, where Jesus will reign wher’er the sun.

<sup>34</sup> *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for time and connotes the key moment, the time when everything changes. I use *kairos* here to help readers move beyond the clock and the calendar (Greek *chronos* from which we get the word chronological) in order to wait longingly in expectation without requiring a schedule.

<sup>35</sup> The Greek word *nephomen* is ordinarily translated as “sober or calm” but has a figurative connotation of “free from illusions.”

<sup>36</sup> c.f. 2 Corinthians 5:21.

<sup>37</sup> c.f. Philippians 2:7.

<sup>38</sup> The Greek word used is *chairete*, which is a part of a word cluster that translates as “joy, rejoicing, grace and gift.” The ordinary English translation that I have expanded upon is “Rejoice always.”

<sup>39</sup> In an era before universal compulsory education, many within the early Christian communities would have been illiterate, so reading the letters publicly to the gathering was the customary means of sharing them.

<sup>40</sup> Cruciform means “formed or shaped by the cross” and seeks to emulate Jesus in one’s ethics and spirituality.

<sup>41</sup> In the rest of this paragraph I explain the likely nature of the persecution (or at least opposition) to the early Christian communities, whose sacramental language led to the accusation of cannibalism and whose rejection of the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods led to the accusation of atheism. Further, as Roman society was highly stratified (i.e. something of a caste system) and segregated (i.e. different genders and races did not commingle), Roman authorities were suspicious of the inclusive Christian communities that crossed economic, social, gender and racial barriers.

<sup>42</sup> The Greek word *koinonia* translates as fellowship and also conveys a deep sense of spiritual and social kinship. *Koinonia* was a hallmark of early Christian communities and a cause for Roman suspicion of their motives—the Romans assuming something political must be the source of the Christian community (see note above).

<sup>43</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, “Who can stand?” This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the Lord, “Who can stand when he appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

<sup>44</sup> c.f. Malachi 3:3 (the penultimate chapter in the Hebrew Bible) for an example of the biblical concept of the “Redeemer’s Fire.” Rather than Dante’s “fire as punishment,” the biblical metaphor for fire is as a cleansing, purifying agent that destroys that which is dross and leaves that which is precious.

<sup>45</sup> The Greek word *eidosin* can be interpreted as “to know, to remember, or to appreciate.” By using appreciate, I hope to convey that living in heaven and participating in God’s kin-dom to come is about more than mere words (e.g. “I said ‘The Sinner’s Prayer’”) but incarnates a full person response to the Gospel as a way of living and moving and having our being.

<sup>46</sup> For the basis of this metaphor, c.f. Matthew 8:12, in which judgment is depicted as not getting to participate in the feast.

<sup>47</sup> This stanza includes references to Top 40 songs from 1980. In order: Air Supply, The Spinners, Pink Floyd, and Queen. If you are not a connoisseur of 80’s music, my apologies for an obscure

reference. If, like me, you came of age in the 80’s, you’re welcome.



<sup>48</sup> Ancient Greek manuscripts use both “lawlessness” and “sin,” and 1 John 2:18 refers to “antichrist” and “antichrists.” Later, 1 John 4:13 and 2 John 1:7 argue not for one person as the antichrist but for a spirit or value system that is prevalent at that time.

<sup>49</sup> c.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, though the reference to the earlier letter is not found in the Greek text.

<sup>50</sup> The Greek word used is *kairos*, one of two words for time, meaning “the key moment when transformation happens.”

<sup>51</sup> Here is an example of how an interpreter’s decision will influence readers’ understanding of the Scripture. The Greek word used is *pempei*, which means either “send” or “permit.” There is a significant difference between “Imma will send them” and “Imma will permit them.” (See also the next note.)

<sup>52</sup> Connecting to the note above, the Greek word used is *planes*, which literally means “wandering” and figuratively means “deceit or delusion.” Taken with the note above, the Greek text can legitimately be translated as “send a delusion” or “permit to wander.” These are two very different meanings.

<sup>53</sup> The Greek word *ekalesan* is usually translated as “called” but has the connotation of both “invited” and “summoned.”

<sup>54</sup> The Greek word used is *stirexei*, which the ESV translates as “strengthen.” However, its primary meaning is “to fix firmly, confirm or make resolute.”

<sup>55</sup> Straight edge is a phrase from youth culture circa 2010’s that refers to those youth who practice traditional values and morality (e.g. “Don’t drink, don’t smoke”). The literal Greek translation is “make straight your hearts,” which the ESV translates as “direct your hearts.”

<sup>56</sup> The Greek word used is *ataktos* and is often translated as “idle.” However, *ataktos* also has military connotations of being “insubordinate, breaking ranks, and being undisciplined.”



PRAYING

1 TIMOTHY,

2 TIMOTHY AND TITUS:

DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER



BRAD MUNROE

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING 1 & 2 TIMOTHY AND TITUS

Paul's letters of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are called the pastoral letters (or epistles.)<sup>1</sup> They are called pastoral because they are addressed to pastors: to Timothy and Titus, who were younger proteges whom Paul mentored. These letters are Paul's counsel for their work.

The pastoral letters use titles not found in Paul's other works.<sup>2</sup> The Greek word *presbyteros*, meaning elder, and *episkopos*, meaning bishop suggest churches with a sophisticated organizational structure. Some scholars see this sophistication as evidence the pastoral letters were written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, which seems accurate to me. These titles did not materially impact the interpretive paraphrase whether I looked at the text as having been written in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century. However, I in the current work I chose to paraphrase "Jesus is Lord" not as "sovereign above Caesar" or "sovereign over the entire cosmos" as in other works but as "sovereign over the Body" to honor that these letters were written to ecclesiastical leaders to help them serve their ecclesiastical community.

When the letters were written had more of an impact on the interpretive paraphrase in regards Paul's specific counsel to Timothy and Titus. There are controversies and arguments to which Paul refers in all three letters, but the references are, with one exception, general rather than specific. If Paul is the author, assuming a 1<sup>st</sup> century date of composition, Paul refers to the debates between Paul and the Jewish Christians who advocated for circumcision as a requirement of Gentile inclusion (c.f. Titus 1:10, which is the one exception). If a "Deutero-Paul" is the author, assuming a 2<sup>nd</sup> century date of composition, the author refers to debates between early Christians and the early Gnostics.

In *Praying 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, I presume a 2<sup>nd</sup> century date of composition because the weight of scholarly evidence seems to argue for this later date. Therefore, the arguments to which Paul refers in the Greek text are paraphrased as if they refer to early Gnostic teaching. The Gnostics believed mystical knowledge of God led to salvation even if ethical knowledge of God was absent from one's life. The Gnostics viewed themselves as the only truly enlightened and learned folks (*gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge). Their supposed enlightenment gave them unique insights into the inner workings of angels, demons, and the realms where the true God and alleged lesser gods lived. Gnostics immersed

themselves in speculative questions, to which Paul refers throughout the pastoral letters.

Paul is nearing the end of his earthly life as he counsels his proteges, Timothy and Titus. He has sent them into challenging ministry settings, in Ephesus and Crete. He writes as a mentor to a mentee: with directness and kindness.

Paul jumps back and forth between direct address to Timothy and Titus and general exposition about theology, ethics, leadership and even personal health (c.f. 1 Timothy 5:23). Keeping clear regarding what is direct address versus general exposition is difficult when reading the pastoral letters. When in doubt as a reader (or one who writes a paraphrase) it is best to assume Paul is making a personal comment to Timothy or Titus—that is, assume direct address.

Because direct address is the primary way that Paul writes, there is always an interpretive question: How much of what Paul writes is eternal wisdom versus what is provincial advice? Is what is written merely good advice to Timothy or Titus as they labor in 1<sup>st</sup> century Ephesus and Crete, or is it counsel for all pastors, everywhere and throughout all centuries? The rule of thumb many scholars use to answer this question, and which I adopt in the interpretive paraphrase, is this: eternal things speak to God's character and well-defined purpose found throughout Scripture, while provincial advice is dependent upon specific culture and social context found in a particular time and place.

Throughout *Praying 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, I attempt to discern the eternal wisdom found in Paul's counsel. However, certain passages are immune to separating out the specific cultural practices and social context from the solid, eternal teaching; specifically, those passages that presume gender hierarchies and tolerance of slavery. I footnote these passages.

Finally, as readers of other work in the *Praying Paul* series know, I refer to Paul with versions of his name from other languages in order to remind myself and my readers the Gospel is a global blessing—it belongs to God who gave it to all the world. In the current work, the Apostle is named UPaul, which is from the Zulu language.

Brad Munroe  
August 2021

## 1 Timothy 1:1-11

UPaul, a sent one<sup>3</sup> of Jesus the Anointed through the command of Imma our Rescuer and of Jesus the Anointed, who is our hope: to Timothy who is my heart, my son in Jesus. May the loving-kindness, forgiveness, and *shalom*<sup>4</sup> of Imma our Mother and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign over the Body,<sup>5</sup> be with you.

Timothy, let me remind you about the job I gave you before I traveled to Macedonia and left you to clean up the mess in Ephesus: Beliefs + Behavior + Belonging = A Healthy Body. Therefore, confront all beliefs that lead astray the gathering<sup>6</sup>; challenge those so-called leaders who spend ceaseless hours in speculation, constructing fables, and arguing endlessly about minutiae. The beliefs taught by those I call The Speculators do not produce the fruit of behavior that dances the God-rhythms of the God-life.

My purpose in commanding you to confront bogus beliefs is Imma's *agape*.<sup>7</sup> Beliefs worthy of Imma produce a clean heart and clear conscience without duplicity, for *agape* cannot be faked.<sup>8</sup> With *agape*, what you see is what you get, no two-faced behavior can imitate *agape*. The Speculators blather and babble, their message best fit for an empty auditorium. They imagine themselves to be learned as they pontificate to all who will lend them an ear, yet their words are an auditory assault.

We know Torah<sup>9</sup> is good if one remembers its purpose:<sup>10</sup> to hold a mirror before us that we may see ourselves as we are, to restrain anarchy, and to guide us toward justice, kindness and humility. Torah cannot create goodness but shows us the ways we must walk. Torah was created for those whose paths tread upon treacherous roads that lead to malice and murder, to distorted desire that destroys relationships, to abuse and oppression of those without power, to manufacturing lies and manipulating laws. Teaching that leads to health in the Body is the opposite of what The Speculators are doing. Your teaching, Timothy, must conform to the Good News that was entrusted to me and which I entrusted to you. Teaching the Good News will make Imma's heart happy.

*Broad is the path that leads to destruction:<sup>11</sup>  
singing bawdy songs of our own demise,  
gorging at feasts of our own destruction.*

*Narrow is the path that leads to life:  
awareness and examination as habits of the heart,  
agape the goal and agape the Way.*

God, it's me. Protect me against being a mere Speculator (as I write about the God-life). Guard me against blather and babble (as I seek to teach others). I pray my teaching will lead others to live with *agape*—loving you, themselves, and neighbors; loving strangers, enemies, and those who persecute them. Imma, help us—we who are the Body of Jesus in this world—to marry our beliefs to our behavior that we might rightly belong to the Body.

## 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign over the Body, has showered me with gifts of kindness and favor. These gifts strengthen me for the service to which he has called me. I am grateful that Jesus considered me trustworthy for my work in his name, for my old life was directed and dominated by my false self. I spoke outrageous lies about Abba and was violent toward his children, yet Abba showered me with kindness and forgiveness because I was a clueless stooge with little understanding of the God-life and less ability to dance the God-rhythms. Abba's loving-kindness was a deluge upon me when his kindness and favor was poured out, and it led me to trust in Jesus the Anointed and belong to the love-fest that is his Body.

Here is a saying you can trust, Timothy. In fact, everyone, everywhere, at all times can trust this saying: Jesus the Anointed became human to rescue broken people (of whom I am the most in need of rescuing). But my brokenness was not an impediment for Jesus but provocation. Jesus saw how much I needed his healing and wholeness, how much I needed his light and love, and Jesus happened in my life. Jesus's patience is on full display in me! If someone like me can be given the gift of eternal life, it can happen to anyone. Indeed, the gift is offered to everyone who trusts that Jesus can happen in their life, too!

Hallelujah to King Jesus!  
Hallelujah to the eternal, immortal, invisible One!  
Hallelujah to the only God!  
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

*Sometimes the urge cannot be denied:  
welling up from the depths,  
heart beating to mystical rhythms found within,  
eyes searching the heavens for the source of joy.*

*Sometimes only one thing suffices:*

*"Hallelujah!" the source,*

*"Hallelujah!" the spirit,*

*"Hallelujah!" the song when Jesus happens.*

God, it's me. I am one in whom Jesus happened. I confess that I was brutal toward other players when I played water polo. I was ravenous for acclaim, and it led me to want to win at all costs. Only your mercy saved me—a mercy so tangible that I could not have denied it had I tried. You wooed my heart and then overshadowed it, for which I will be forever grateful. Abba, I will forever sing "Hallelujah!" to you and to your son, Jesus my sovereign.

### 1 Timothy 1:18 – 2:7<sup>15</sup>

Timothy, my heart, I command you to remember the prophecies once made about you. In remembering, you will be readied to stand<sup>18</sup> against the forces of avarice, betrayal, and corruption. In remembering, you will be able to oppose the broken and destructive forces of this world with a clean heart and a clear conscience. In remembering, your trust will be bolstered, and you will not suffer the fate of some whose trust has been shipwrecked. (I am thinking of Hymeneus and Alexander, whom I have released to the Accuser, that in their lives they may learn the consequences of abusing sacred things.)

Timothy, set prayer as your primary intention. Pray for yourself and for others and pray with thanksgiving. Pray for the Emperor and his governors, too, that their caprice would not lead to chaos for the gathering and that we would be allowed to live with Imma and for Imma in all things. Such prayers for all people are good and make Imma happy, for Imma's design<sup>14</sup> is for all people to be made whole and complete through the God-life and dance the God-rhythms as if they know the beat by heart. More than mere wish or desire, Imma has willed what she intends.

If someone doesn't believe what I have just said, tell them this: Imma is One and sent Jesus the Anointed to be the one and only intermediary between herself and all humankind. Jesus brought heaven with him to earth and ushered earth up to the feet of the heavenly throne. Jesus built the bridge between humanity and the divine—paying all the taxes and every toll—so that all people have free and open access to *his* bridge. His bridge building happened

according to Imma's *kairos*,<sup>15</sup> and we bear witness to this winsome wonder. I, too, was claimed for this work of bearing witness to the Good News of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do. To help accomplish this work I have been sent into the world—not lying, not bragging, just saying. Through this work I teach the Nations how to trust Imma and walk the Way of Jesus.

*In the beginning...*

*and Imma saw all that she had made...*

*and pronounced it very good.<sup>16</sup>*

*Imma looked upon the wickedness of humankind...*

*it grieved her heart...*

*and she was deeply troubled.<sup>17</sup>*

*Imma so loved the world...<sup>18</sup>*

*she sent Jesus...*

*that trust may be the door to wholeness and life.*

*Imma wishes; she desires...*

*Imma wills; she intends...*

*Imma designs: all will be made whole and complete.<sup>19</sup>*

God, it's me. I wish the biblical witness was not cluttered with many voices. I desire an easy clarity rather than sacred cacophony. I will that I would understand everything (but my will has been frustrated, so far). I intend to seek and keep on seeking the truth found only in your love. My design is that...well, my design really doesn't matter, does it? Only your design matters, and I am thankful that I am included in it.

### 1 Timothy 2:8-15

So, Timothy, let me give you some practical advice about leading the gathering in Ephesus. I want the men of Ephesus to pray wherever they go. I desire that they raise their hands and say, "Amen!" to Abba without any fussing or fighting among them.

I want the women of Ephesus to quit making Sunday worship into a fashion show. They dress so upscale—with gold and pearls, elaborate hairstyles and expensive clothes—that they seek to set themselves apart from others in the gathering when they should be set apart<sup>20</sup> from the values of a broken culture—and set apart for

Imma's work in bringing wholeness to all. These women should dial it down a notch when dressing. Better yet, they should clothe themselves with goodness and justice and mercy that express the God-life.

Further, I hear that these same women are parroting the blather and babble of The Speculators.<sup>21</sup> This is not the way of things in the gatherings of Jesus. Instead of learning from The Speculators, the women of Ephesus should become true disciples of the Good Shepherd—learn the gifts of stillness before Abba and the blessings of obedience to Abba.<sup>22</sup> Until these lessons can be learned, these women should not be allowed to teach. They are like Eve, who was deceived by the Serpent, for they have been deceived by The Speculators. They should remember, though, that Eve, as the first woman, was redeemed by Mary, the mother of Jesus—she who is *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, and reversed the curse that entered the world when she was deceived. They, too, can have the consequences of their deception reversed through learning the ways of trust and of *agape*, choosing to walk the stable path of justice and joy.

*Wisdom  
sound advice  
yet if context  
changes, wisdom becomes folly  
discern*

God, it's me. I notice how energized some men get at the thought of a woman pastor. I don't notice quite the same energy when men aren't raising their hands. I notice how women are targeted for direct (and behind their backs) "commentary" about how they dress. I don't notice anyone, ever, (not once!) criticizing me for wearing a nice tie. Abba, could there be sexism in the gatherings of Jesus? If I have ever added to this sin, facilitated its continued presence among us by something I did or said, or remained silent when I should have spoken out, forgive me. And may my sisters forgive me, too.

### 1 Timothy 3:1-15<sup>23</sup>

Here is some more practical, trustworthy advice, Timothy. Anyone eager to be a leader in the gathering sets their hearts upon honor and nobility—it is a high calling. Therefore, leaders can't be those caught in corruption but

should be vigilant with their virtue. They should take care to observe safe boundaries that preserve trust and respect. They should open their hearts and homes to others and be able to open Imma's Word to all. If married, they should be faithful to their spouse both in body and in spirit, with both their heart and hands and voice. They shouldn't continually give themselves over to drunkenness but express who they are through gentleness—violence and quarrelling are no way for a leader to live, nor is an insatiable desire for money.

Leaders of the gathering demonstrate their ability to manage Imma's family by how they manage their own family: the children are obedient not because they fear their parents but because they respect them. Further, the leader should not be someone new to the God-life, as we don't want their head to swell with pride. Arrogance is the Accuser's realm and leaders of the gathering do well to steer clear of him. True leaders avoid the Accuser's deceit, duplicity and disgrace.

The servants among you all—those called deacons, both women and men<sup>24</sup>—must be like the leaders: worthy of respect and trust. Deacons wear dignity as a shawl around their shoulders at all times and in every place. They pursue neither too much drink nor dishonest gain but chase with abandon the deep wisdom of the God-life, while always seeking that their lives will shine clear in the light of the sun.<sup>25</sup> Because deacons care for those who are most vulnerable within the gathering, they need to be tested. Make sure they are prepared well to serve and prepared to serve well. This applies both to male and female deacons.<sup>26</sup> (Given what I said above about certain women in Ephesus, especially counsel these women to avoid malice and embrace modesty. They should demonstrate to the gathering that they can be trusted in all things.) Finally, a deacon, like a leader, must be able to manage one's own family as a way of demonstrating their ability to manage Imma's family. All deacons who serve in this manner climb a stairway<sup>27</sup> to virtue and are embraced by the assurance that their trust in Jesus the Anointed is something real.

I write this practical instruction to you, Timothy, even though I hope to visit you soon in Ephesus. However, if I am delayed, you will know how to instruct the Ephesians to live in holy communion with Imma and her holy community, for the sake of a holy compassion for the world, which is truth being enacted for all to see.

*Comforting the afflicted,  
afflicting the comfortable.*

*Influence without authority,  
coming through servanthood.*

*Leadership is hard work,  
and sometimes blessed.*

God, it's me. I pray for my pastors! The emotional load of bearing others' pain weighs them down. I pray for my pastors! The spiritual load of proclaiming Gospel truths in a world (and a church?) that does not want to listen becomes for their souls an anchor. I pray for my pastors! As they climb the stairway to virtue you have set before them, embrace our pastors with the assurance that their trust in Jesus is something real, and their leadership really matters.

### 1 Timothy 3:16

Without a doubt and with full conviction, I can say this: the headwaters of the sacred are a mystery—that which creates the ever-flowing stream is discerned through a wisdom not embraced by all. But for all who embrace the mystery, it is discerned in Jesus the Anointed, who unveils the divine among all humanity:

He was sent to the earth;  
humanity his swaddling clothes.  
He was declared righteous in spirit;  
humankind glimpsing the divine justice.  
He was hailed by angels;  
who could not look away.  
He was proclaimed among peoples;  
who were invited to look and keep looking.  
He was trusted by the Cosmos;  
which opened itself to transformation.  
He was taken into glory;  
which welcomed home its favorite son.

*God is not in a box;  
certainly not in my box.*

*God is not a cog;  
certainly not a cog in my machine.*

*God is not a cause and effect mechanism;  
certainly not one I'll ever manipulate.*

*God is sacred;  
only the Breath discerns his being.*

*God is mystery;  
only the Wind follows his Way.*

*God is Jesus;  
whom Wind and Breath incarnate in you and me.*

God, it's me. I think I know how to connect the dots from Jesus' humanity to his deity. I think I understand such things because I am ordained. Doesn't my seminary degree make me able? Hardly. Mostly they make me arrogant. I confess my arrogance to you, Abba, and humble myself before the eternal mystery of your making: God in human flesh, God incarnate, God en carne ("God in meat"). Oh my, how am I supposed to connect these dots? What I cannot do of my own intellect, do for me, do within me, do through me. Humble me into discernment. Open me to the sacred. Whisper your wisdom in my heart and breathe your mystery into my being.

### 1 Timothy 4:1- 11

Let me get back to the subject of The Speculators, Timothy. The Divine Spirit tells us: hysterical<sup>28</sup> people do not make reasonable choices. The hysteria they experience is an inner storm that leads them to abandon their trust in Abba and the assurance of his loving-kindness. They are easily deceived. The Speculators, hypocrites and liars whose moral conscience has lost the ability to feel any remorse, are the ones deceiving them.

Let me compare The Speculators' teaching to what is found in Scripture. They say, "Do not marry and do not eat meat!" Their "No Marriage, No Meat" sermons betray the goodness of Abba's design. But Genesis instructs us to be thankful for all things, for Abba created all things and declared them very good.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the creation is a delight to be welcomed with thanksgiving; it is shown to be sacred by Abba's Word and through prayer.

Start serving the sisters and brothers by instructing them in such foundational truths as Abba's goodness in creation. Continue your service to them by encouraging them to follow the Way of Jesus the Anointed, just as you have been taught and have followed. Don't wade into the

swamp and try to debate on The Speculators' terms: ceaseless hours in speculation, constructing fables, and arguing endlessly about minutiae will never produce our true selves nor form the image of Jesus within us.

Think about your service to the people as if you are an athlete. Working out is good! Allowing Abba to fashion the image of Jesus within you is better. Being healthy is good! Preparing body and soul for both today and all tomorrows is better. Trust what I am telling you, and don't overthink it. Live both for today and for the age to come. Fatigue and agony accompany all striving but only the striving that seeks the God-life leads to the sure and certain assurance that our lives are held in Abba's hands. Abba rescues all people, as we who trust in him are most clearly aware.<sup>30</sup> This is how you should preach and teach, Timothy.

*Exiting the Swamp  
Truth leading to God's justice  
What truly matters?*

God, it's me. I thank you for the goodness of creation: for joy found in loving another and loving one another, for a meal shared with others. I thank you for the goodness of salvation: for the One who saves and that we have been saved through him and for him. I thank you for the goodness of transformation:<sup>31</sup> that the One who saves continues the work until it is fully accomplished, that we are being saved and being saved, a work that continues until Jesus' image within us is fully formed for the world to see.

### 1 Timothy 4:12-16

Look to your own formation as a leader, Timothy. Don't receive into your heart others' judgment of you simply because you are young—and don't allow their prejudice to define you. Instead, confront their opinions through your personal example: in what you say and how you say it, in what you do and how you do it. May the example of your trust shine clear in the light of the sun. You got this, and I believe in you.

Until I get to Ephesus (hopefully sooner rather than later), focus your efforts on getting the people into the Word and getting the Word into the people. Read it, preach it, teach it. Remember that Imma's Word is not just

a book we read but a book that reads us back. Don't neglect the Word in your own life nor in your service to the Body. You have a gift for conveying the Word, Timothy. This gift was revealed to you when older members of Imma's family laid hands on you—remember, remember, remember—and then act accordingly.

Strive to grow as a leader in the Body. Do the work—not just your ministry tasks but the work needed for your growth and formation as a leader. What you do expresses who you are, so notice what you are doing—become ever more aware of any inconsistencies between what you say and what you do. Persevere in this work of self-examination that others may see your growth. Persist in your own journey toward becoming your true self that others will want to join you on the journey toward becoming whole and complete.

*Leadership  
always becoming  
growing toward maturity  
coherent outside with inside  
work*

God, it's me. Make me a better leader—a leader whose attitudes and actions cohere, who walks the walk of what I talk. Make me a better leader—a leader doing my own self-work before inviting others to do their own work, becoming more aware of my blind spots. Make me a better leader—a leader immersed in the Word, inviting others to experience your loving-kindness revealed within its pages. Make me a better leader, Imma—the one you see that I can become.

### 1 Timothy 5:1-2

Timothy, once you have done your own work of formation as a leader, you will be prepared for the many challenges of leadership within the Body. There are many such challenges, and I cannot cover all of them here. However, here is my counsel regarding what I have heard about the gathering in Ephesus. You are guaranteed to encounter certain difficulties.

Because you are young, you are asked to mentor older men, which can feel super awkward. Don't ignore any feelings of discomfort, for you are more likely to lash out than lead, more likely to convey disrespect than honor. Treat older men as if they are your father, showing respect

toward them even when you challenge their behaviors. While I'm on the subject, treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters. Especially with younger women, you must ensure appropriate boundaries are in place as you interact with them. These boundaries must be absolute and unequivocal—leading all to see that you shine clear in the light of the sun.

*Pastors' lament:*

*"This job would be easy were it not for the people."  
How often have I heard it said?*

*Yet "people" are not impediments to the work,  
but instruments of blessing through which I learn:  
respect and truth-telling and boundaries.*

*Don't forget the boundaries;  
never neglect boundaries,  
if you want to shine clear in the light of the sun.*

God, it's me. I remember when I was freshly ordained: 25 and full of vinegar. I was asked to teach a class on prayer. There sat Barbara in the front row—a lifetime of experience in the practice. What in your good name could I teach her that she didn't already know? Chagrined to the point of stuttering, I began to teach. I learned a lot teaching that class, mostly because of Barbara. I learned by her example. I learned the blessing of being in the presence of one so humble, caring, and encouraging. I learned that seminary didn't teach me everything I needed to know. Thank you, Barbara.

## 1 Timothy 5:3-11

Now regarding the subject of the women within the gathering in Ephesus, I understand there are many widows.<sup>32</sup> Some of these widows are in real need, while others have family resources that can care for them. Don't fall into the trap of assuming everyone's situation is the same. Rather, make allowances for the different circumstances. If a widow is truly in need, you must honor her with support and provision. However, if a widow has family that can support and care for her, her children and grandchildren should practice what we say we believe, which makes Abba's heart happy.

The widow who is really in need has no one but Abba to help her. This widow pours her heart out to Abba day and night begging to be rescued from a society that prevents her from working or a body too frail to work. But there are other widows among you in Ephesus who seek a life of idleness and indolence. These widows pour their hearts out for pleasure and are dead to the God-life even while they claim to live it. Here are some guidelines for handling this situation, Timothy.

1. Tell all the gathering to provide for their own family, especially those in their own household. To neglect one's own family denies the God-life. Even those who do not trust in Abba know enough to care for their families.
2. As a general rule, only widows over 60 should be put on the deacons' care list. Further, these widows should be known in the gathering as women of character and conscience. They should be willing to contribute to the work of showing the world the holy compassion of Abba's holy community.
3. As a general rule, don't put younger widows on the deacons' care list. While many younger widows make a vow of chastity and commitment to the work of Abba's holy compassion, they break their sacred vow when the desire and opportunity to marry arises. It is better that they are not asked to make a vow of service to the work the widows perform in Abba's holy community. (Besides, as a widow's life is not overwhelmed by care for her family, they get into the habit of idleness, which leads to spiritual mischief: gossip and overbearing, know-it-all behavior that is unhelpful to the Body. This is why I counsel younger widows to marry, care for their own family and give the Accuser no ammunition with which to launch an attack on the Body. Some who ignored my counsel have already turned aside to pursue the Accuser.)
4. Finally, any woman who is already helping a widow in the gathering should continue supporting the widows receiving her care. The gathering needs all the help it can get! The woman who continues her support frees up the gathering's resources for others—the need is great indeed.

*Ah, the first "Book of Order."  
It has grown since UPaul's day.*

*Now I can read about...  
required seminary classes,  
how to call a meeting or how to sell property,  
and who is in charge of creating the bulletin!*

*WWUT?*

*(What Would UPaul Think?)*

*Good counsel is always needed,  
but counsel is different than commandment.*

God, it's me. Forgive my cynicism, Abba. I actually appreciate church polity—most of the time. When the Book of Order replaces the Bible—not so much. When Robert's many Rules outweigh Micah's three—not so much. When counsel becomes commandment—not so much. Abba, help me respect the rules, even if they are only rules-of-thumb. Teach me humility before the wisdom of your holy community, who created so many rules that I have run out of thumbs on which to count them. Abba, did I mention I need forgiveness for my cynicism?

### 1 Timothy 5:17-25

Now regarding your leaders, you should appreciate that their work is difficult, challenging and necessary for the Body to function well. Leaders who guide the work of the gathering are worthy of double honor—acclaim them twice with “Hip-Hip, Hooray!” Those who preach and teach are especially worthy of such acclaim for this work speaks to the gathering's identity and purpose. There can be no Body without the Word being welcomed in hearts and minds, so there must always be those willing and able to tell the Good News message.<sup>33</sup>

The Word says,

Let the oxen do their job, and,  
Give the worker all their due.<sup>34</sup>

If this is true of ox and common laborer, how much greater is the respect due to leaders who proclaim the Good News for the sake of the Body? Many will aim their ire at such leaders, for the work requires leaders to challenge the people. Like the truth-tellers of Israel, those who lead the Body both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.<sup>35</sup> Many reject affliction, even when it helps them to dance the God-rhythms.

Therefore, if anyone accuses a leader of misconduct, be sure it does not come from a place of jealousy or arrogance but is grounded in facts that misconduct has occurred. Always require two or three witnesses before an accusation is taken seriously. Now, if the accusation is found to be true, the leader must be held accountable publicly. The Body must be assured their leaders are people of good conscience and character. I charge you before Imma, Jesus the Anointed, and their heavenly messengers to follow these instructions to the letter. It doesn't matter how popular or revered the leader is; every leader is to be held to the same, high standards. Imma doesn't play favorites, nor should favoritism be allowed in the gatherings that seek to honor her. Therefore, don't be too hasty to ordain leaders before they are ready to serve. When you lay your hands upon them, praying the Divine Spirit will accompany them in their service, you share in any misconduct they inflict upon the Body. Keep yourself honorable by only honoring those ready to receive the charge to leadership.

And, Timothy, be careful about what you are eating and drinking. If the water in Ephesus is unclean, try some wine. It'll help your stomach.

Oh, one last note about leaders who are accused of misconduct.<sup>36</sup> Some sins are painfully obvious—a trumpeter announces their arrival. Other sins remain hidden (for a time) but the trail of their breadcrumbs is easy to follow. In a similar way, some good deeds are so plain to see they invite great acclaim, and even hidden goodness can't stay a secret.

*Acclaim and accountability  
spinning a top.*

*A balance of both seems about right.  
Too much of either and the top careens off the table.*

*Acclaim without accountability is idolatry.  
Accountability without acclaim is drudgery.*

God, it's me. As one who hears accusations against leaders, give me wisdom—insight and compassion, too. Give me the gifts of encouragement and mercy. Most of all, give me a love for the Body, who needs to be protected, and a love for the leader, whose character and career have been targeted. Imma, without these gifts, I cannot serve. Even with these gifts, the

service is challenging and necessary for the Body to function well. Imma, in your mercy, hear my prayer.

### 1 Timothy 6:1-2a<sup>37</sup>

Treat even those who oppress you as created *imago dei*,<sup>38</sup> in the image of Abba, whose name and wisdom must be revered under all circumstances. Your oppressors may be members of the gathering. Disrespecting them will not liberate you. Treat them with the dignity that all of Abba's beloved deserve and teach others to do likewise. For your own sake, hold on to both your integrity and your identity. That is, hold on to the truth that you, too, are beloved.

Sometimes a horrible circumstance pits two of Jesus' beloved against each other. In this situation, do not disrespect the other who also follows Jesus. Show respect rather than disdain; indeed, love them all the more because they are sisters and brothers.

*Holding on for dear life...  
sometimes feels like  
losing our mind.*

*Holding on for dear life...  
sometimes keeps us from  
losing our true self.*

*When will we stop making others hold on?*

God, it's me. I struggle with UPaul's tolerance of oppression—in this case, literally, his tolerance of slavery. I know he was radical and progressive for his day, but his words still seem “enabling of the oppressor.” I agree we do not want to lose ourselves in hatred as we oppose the hateful, yet this seems like an excuse to avoid standing against oppression, abuse, and violence. I desire to protect others, to advocate for just treatment. Please help me understand what I am to do with this kind of a passage.

### 1 Timothy 6:2b-11

Timothy, here are some more things for you to teach the Ephesians. This is really important! Don't waver on foundational principles but call people to draw near to them—to recline at the Table and be nourished by them.

Anyone who rejects teaching that builds integrity walks around in a fog, wandering aimlessly. They stumble into unfruitful controversies and fall head-first into never-ending quarrels. Anyone who refuses to embrace teaching that protects against corruption has contracted a spiritual disease that leads to strangled hearts, twisted tongues, and suspicious minds. They commit fraud against the Body and, under the guise of being “helpful,” interfere in others' journey toward their true self. And they do all this for money—it's all about the Benjamins for them.

Devoting oneself to the Way of Jesus brings great competence in the God-life. Piety that pursues the God-rhythms leads to a good life, even if it doesn't generate a livelihood. All life is a gift, Timothy. The only thing we had when we were born was the reflection of Imma's imprint upon our being and that is all we leave this life with, too. Having enough food and sufficient warm clothing to get by is all we need to be satisfied. Dancing to the tune of the almighty dollar does not lead to piety. Many who chase the almighty dollar dance the God-rhythms with two, left feet—stumbling and falling in the God-life becomes a regular occurrence for them. Believing that, “If I just make money a friend, I'll know joy,”<sup>39</sup> is the source of depraved thinking. In searching for wealth, many have found grief. In trusting wealth for their happiness, many have wandered from trusting Imma for their wholeness. Run, Timothy, run! As one claimed by Imma, run away from the idolatry that money can buy happiness. Instead, chase after right relationships.<sup>40</sup> Pursue them with devotion and trust, with *agape* and endurance, and with humility, too.

*Tool to use.*

*Gift to share.*

*Not the source of our belonging.*

*“In God we trust.”*

*On our coins!*

*That proves how much we trust in...*

God, it's me. Free me from bondage to the almighty dollar—from its pursuit at all costs, from seeking that which cannot satisfy my soul. Free me for generosity and gladness—that is found through pursuing you, found in the One who alone can satisfy my soul. Free me to dance the tune of devotion not of the dollar. Free me to find justice and joy through dancing with you.

## 1 Timothy 6:12-16

Agonize<sup>11</sup> over your faith as if it really matters, for it does! Cling by your fingertips if you must, at first, but little by little grasp and then clutch and then fully embrace the God-life, for it is good for this life and perfect for the age to come, for life in the kin-dom. When you were invited into the God-life, you declared your readiness publicly—many of Abba's beloved heard you and rejoiced! Abba also heard you and rejoiced.

Abba, Creator of all, the sovereign who alone gives life, is my witness, Timothy. And Jesus, too, the Anointed One who declared the God-life before the Roman Governor Pilate, is also my witness. As these bear witness, I charge you to guard the citadels of your trust and love. Protect your reputation and your relationships, that both may remain clear in the light of the sun. Make it improbable (if not impossible) that others would accuse you of malice or even tainted motives. Keep on keeping on until the Day of Jesus, when the fullness of the kin-dom will be unveiled—unmistakable for what it is and who is the true sovereign. Abba will do the unveiling when the *kairos* comes. In preparation for that Day, we remember toward hope and give Abba praise:

Abba the Blessed!  
Abba the Sovereign!

King of kings!  
Lord of lords!

Immortal! Invisible!  
Unapproachable in light!

No eye has seen, nor mind can imagine!  
Honor Abba and give thanks!

Amen!!!

*Holy the agony  
that frets over newborn faith  
that stays up waiting for hope to arrive home safely  
that longs for a call from love.*

*Sacred the agony  
that nurtures one's charge  
that endures the waiting  
that prepares for the Day when kin-dom comes.*

God, it's me. I know how to fight. Too well do I know it. So when, in traditional translations, I read "fight the good fight of faith," I get stuck on the word fight. I understand what UPaul meant to convey—that the struggle is internal and spiritual—but find I too easily externalize my opponent; too often name my adversary as whoever stands in front of me. Ah, Abba, save me from myself and from a culture that loves to fight. Help me agonize over my faith as a parent who nurtures their newborn, concerned for their teenager driving alone for the first time, looking to hear from those whom they love. This, to me, is worth "fighting" for.

## 1 Timothy 6:17-21

Timothy, warn those who are wealthy in the ways of this world not to build their identity upon money, which can disappear at a moment's notice, nor to be arrogant about their affluence. Instead, trust Imma to provide an abundance of wholeness and the extravaganza of hope found in the God-life. This kind of wealth, found only in Imma, is worthy of applause.<sup>12</sup> Alert those who are wealthy (in the ways of the world) to be rich in doing good deeds—generosity and sharing should be their life motto! Through generosity they prepare themselves for the kin-dom. Through sharing they grab hold of the God-life.

Timothy, take care of Imma's gathering by remembering who you are and where you come from—that Imma claimed you and placed her seal upon you as a young man. Remember, too, Imma herself has called you to this work of caring for the gathering. Turn away from the silly spouting of The Speculators, with their alleged knowledge, for it can only lead to mischief. Indeed, some who listen to them have wandered away from trusting Imma.

May Imma's loving-kindness be with all of you.

*He started his own bank.  
Who has that kind of money?  
And when there was a need, all I had to do was ask.*

*She answered, "That's the number I was thinking, too."  
It was a most generous gift.  
It helped us move forward in ministry and mission.*

*Wealth as source of identity—  
Roller-coaster and  
Fun House mirrors*

*Wealth as source of generosity—  
Paying it forward  
Blessed to be a blessing*

God, it's me. Make me an instrument of blessing, to the extent that I can, to the people whom you bring into my life. Where there is selfishness, let me find joy in generosity. Where there is "ownership," remind me the whole earth is yours and all things belong to you. O Divine Master, may I not so much seek to define myself by the things I own but by the grace that I belong to you. For we brought nothing into this world but your image within us. I pray I'll keep that image clean and buffed and polished for others to see.

## 2 Timothy 1:1-5

UPaul, a sent one of Jesus the Anointed—sent by the grit and determination of Imma to enact the God-life found in Jesus—to Timothy, my heart: Loving-kindness, sweeping-mercy, and *shalom* from Imma the Mother and Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign over the Body.

Gratitude is my sacred obligation as I live to serve Imma, as generations before me so served, with integrity that shines clear in the light of the sun.<sup>43</sup> My gratitude leads me to pray for you night and day. I remember the tears you shed when we last parted, and they make me ache to see you, that my heart would be whole again, filled with joy. When I look at you, Timothy, I see your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. The trust in Imma they lived now lives in you.

*Cradle Christian  
No grand moment of "Ah-ha!"  
Faith breathed into one's becoming  
Hope both legacy and promise  
Love the beginning and the end*

God, it's me. As one who converted into the faith, I have the classic, evangelical experience. I was not and then I was, as if "coming forward to the altar" gives me bona fides in the faith. Imma, as precious as my experiences was, I see others who have been embraced

in love from their first breath, learned the way upon their grandmother's knee, and taken their first steps on eternity's journey with their hands held by another. I am grateful for my experience yet see the value of all paths that lead us to a common faith, a shared hope, and a mutual love—so long as they lead to you.

## 2 Timothy 1:6 - 2:1

Because you were claimed from before the beginning of time, I remind you. Because you were called to this work by the laying on of hands, I encourage you. Because you were gifted for the work of this particular ministry, I implore you to nurture the spark that will ignite the flame of your passion for Abba. Abba's Divine Spirit shapes our conscience and forms our character. The Divine Spirit, like an artist, crafts us toward a goal: not to be cowardly but courageous for the sake of *agape*<sup>44</sup> and wise<sup>45</sup> in how we use our gifts.

Timothy, don't be ashamed of my situation. I am in prison<sup>46</sup> because of the Good News—so what? Rather than feel ashamed, join me in pouring out your heart to the world. Let us together empty ourselves of all lust for power and control that together Abba's *agape* will flow from us! Abba has made us whole and complete—ready for the age to come. Abba did this so that we would be set apart from the broken values of this world and set apart to be new creation. Abba has a purpose for us and through loving-kindness invites us into living it.

This loving-kindness was Abba's gift to us through Jesus the Anointed. The gift was given before the beginning of time and will remain until after the end of all things: It cannot be lost and will not be taken away. The gift was unveiled through our Rescuer, Jesus the Anointed, whose own self-emptying of divine privilege<sup>47</sup> began the inevitable, inexorable unwinding of death. Jesus' person and work has brought, is bringing, and will always bring the God-life into existence—the life where our false self is no more<sup>48</sup> and only our true self shines light into the world.

Telling the Good News story about Jesus is the work for which I have been claimed and called and gifted. I have been sent to tell this story and so I tell it proudly, with vigor. I teach about it diligently, too, even though it is the target people aim at that causes me to suffer. But the Good News is no cause for being ashamed. I know the One in whom I have put my trust: Abba! I trust Abba is able to hold me and am confident that what I have entrusted to

him—my very person—Abba will embrace until the Day when Jesus is unveiled.

So, Timothy, keep on keeping on with the ways of solid teaching you learned from your grandmother, your mother, and from me. Teach others the Way, trusting that the *agape* of Jesus the Anointed is upon you. Guard what you have learned confident the Divine Spirit will help you keep it safe.

Timothy, my heart, I do understand your troubles. You know that pretty much<sup>49</sup> everyone in the gatherings around Turkey has deserted me (even Phygelus and Hermogenes!), though Onesiphorus has stuck with me. May Abba honor him and his entire household, for in my darkest moments while in prison he shined the light and love of Jesus into my heart. And this was no easy task! Onesiphorus had to search high and low for me, for, as you know, the place of my imprisonment was a house arrest rather than a central prison.<sup>50</sup> But he found me, and his presence encouraged me. May Abba shower him with loving-kindness on the Day of Jesus' unveiling. (Both for how he has served me here and, as you know, in Ephesus, too.) You, then, my heart, receive the courage found through Jesus the Anointed's loving-kindness.

*The horizon seems far away  
when all I have is memory.  
Your letters are nice, but your presence is preferred.*

*"Claimed and called and gifted," you say.  
More like challenged and confronted and undermined.  
Leadership is lonely.*

*Hope weakens  
when trouble confronts.  
I wish I could hear your voice again.*

God, it's me. I sense Paul is bolstering Timothy's spirit—en-courage-ing him for leadership. How often have I needed such courage? Too many times to count! So I thank you for those whose words put courage for leading your people into my heart. I pray that my words to pastors would give them a similar courage. Help me to uplift them and lighten their load! May I be more like the wind beneath their wings rather than the anchor beneath their sails.

## 2 Timothy 2:2-7

Timothy, let me give you two, quick pieces of advice for your leadership. First: delegate, delegate, delegate. Spread the wealth (of your knowledge and wisdom) of what you have heard me say by coaching up others. Seek out those who are wise and trustworthy—able to communicate the God-life and teach others to dance the God-rhythms.

Second: focus, focus, focus. You must be willing to suffer (like I do) if that is what it takes to do the work. It's like being a soldier (with Jesus as commander): The only thing that matters to a soldier is pleasing the commander—the concerns of civilian life are unimportant in the midst of battle. Or again, here's another metaphor: It's like being an athlete whose only focus is the victor's wreath—they must play by the rules, but they compete to win the race. Or again, here's yet a third metaphor: It's like being a farmer whose muscles ache but who knows the first crops of the harvest will show up on their table. Leading the gathering for the sake of the God-life is worthy of all the effort. Ponder these metaphors, Timothy, assured that Imma will give you wisdom for your leadership.

*Leadership intends  
to give away all it can  
keeping what it must*

God, it's me. I hear UPaul saying, "Give your job away and do your job." This seems backwards. My instinct is first to make sure I am doing my job. Only then do I feel permission to ask others to do their job, too. Is there something magical about inviting wise and trustworthy people into the work of teaching, sharing and showing the Good News? Is the work of the Church best played as a team sport? Am I to understand that doing my job is super important AND...I cannot do the work all by myself?

## 2 Timothy 2:8-13

The Good News I teach and that you are to remember and recount always says Jesus the Anointed descended into Death and then began its unwinding; Abba raised him who is David's seed.<sup>51</sup> This Good News has led me to be treated like a criminal—I am in shackles, but the

Good News cannot be shackled, for it can bring only liberation. I persist with my shackles gladly for the sake of those whom Abba has claimed, chosen, and called. I persevere with my shackles that those whom Abba has elected may be made whole and complete in Jesus, ready to reflect Abba's light and love both in this age and in the age to come. Here is a song you can trust to be true:

As death, so life—  
 both in Jesus;  
 As we serve below, so will we celebrate above—  
 together with Jesus;  
 As we reject, so he allows—  
 for love is sacred to Jesus;  
 As we fail in our trusting, so he will never fail—  
 for Jesus must be true to himself.

*Love is togetherness:  
 together in life and in death  
 together in service and in celebration  
 together in failure and in faith.*

*Love is sacred:  
 sacred choice  
 sacred welcome  
 sacred embrace.*

*What happens when love is not reciprocated?*

*God, it's me. Teach me to accept that I am claimed, chosen, and called. Teach me to appreciate that I bear the divine image within me. As I celebrate my being one of your beloved, help me to invite others to join me in this sacred fiesta that is faith in Jesus. Give me an open heart to receive others and words that embrace them with your divine love. May we celebrate our belovedness together, for celebrations are meant to be shared and a fiesta of one is no fiesta at all.*

## 2 Timothy 2:14-26

Timothy, call Abba's children to mindfulness regarding the following truths: Their constant bickering is worthless banter that brings destruction upon those who hear them. Warn people they are in Abba's presence!

Do what you can, not what you cannot. But do what you can to the best of your ability. Whatever you do, do it as one seeking Abba's approval, as someone who can

stand proud and shout with glee, "Look what I present to you as a holy offering!" This is especially important for those who teach, preach, and counsel with Abba's Word; they must be linguistic surgeons<sup>32</sup> able to heal.

Run away and hide from empty disputing,<sup>33</sup> for it has no foundation in the God-life. Such empty disputes spread like a virus and lead people farther and farther from Abba. Hymenaeus and Philetus are two examples of people who love empty disputes (and have run away and hid from the truth). They teach that resurrection is only spiritual, that it has already occurred. They betray the Good News' hope and lead others toward despair, which opposes trust. However, empty disputes that lead to despair are no match for trust in Abba. Their empty disputing cannot damage the sure and certain foundation that bears the imprint of Abba's signet ring, and which reminds us:

Abba knows all who belong to him!  
 All who belong to him rebel against injustice!

In a large home there are many things: gold and silver yet also wood and clay. These things are metaphors for the God-life. Some ways bring integrity and others bring infamy. Some paths lead toward dignity and others lead toward disgrace. Live the ways and walk the paths that lead toward integrity and dignity<sup>34</sup> and you will be set apart for Abba's purposes, prepared to be helpful for all kinds of good works.

Shun juvenile eagerness<sup>35</sup> and instead, along with others whose purity shines clear in the light of the sun, pursue right relationships, trust, *agape* and *shalom*.

Spurn every opportunity to take part in ignorant debates that procreate controversy for argument's sake. Abba's servants are to be kind not cantankerous, able to teach not prone to squabble, tending toward amiable rather than always aggrieved. Those who quest endlessly for disputes must be confronted with instruction that gently invites repentance—the turning away from obstinance and turning toward openness to the Way of Jesus. Only then will they avoid the Accuser's snare, by which the Accuser seeks to hold their hearts and minds captive.

*Hodgepodge  
 much wisdom  
 all good things  
 where should I start  
 needful*

God, it's me. I count six pieces of wisdom offered by UPaul for your children. Six. And three of them are about not quarrelling! In our era of hyper-partisanship, how desperately do we need to hear this message? Abba, I know the Word is not just for others but also for me: I need to hear this message! Forgive me those times I pushed, prodded, and provoked someone, knowing the response I would get. Forgive me those times I knew better than to take the bait of another's provocation yet took it anyway. Forgive me, also, those times when I needed to confront with instruction that gently invites repentance yet remained silent. Abba, may I—and may we—do better, for the sake of a world who is watching your people, waiting to see if we will reflect the *agape* of Jesus.

## 2 Timothy 3:1-9

Timothy, I now move from advice to warning. In the seasons before the second advent of Jesus, things will get bad—people will be bad. Some people will only know how to love themselves; their specialty will be bragging and boasting about their smallest skill. Some people will be arrogant, abusive, and filled with avarice, while others will be apathetic<sup>56</sup> and unappreciative—they won't care about others, and no one will be able to make them care. Some will exhibit explosive anger—brutal and without self-control—while others will spend lavishly for any hint of pleasure, which will be like a god for them to pursue.

The worst part of all that I have described, Timothy, is that these people will look and sound religious. In their treachery, they will try to trick people into thinking they follow Imma, but none of them will know Imma's *dunamis*.<sup>57</sup> Stay away from these people, Timothy, for they are traitors to the God-life.

Among these people are men who wheedle their way into the lives of a vulnerable woman. Perhaps the woman has a young child or is underemployed, or perhaps she is older with less of a retirement fund due to all the years she devoted to caring for her children. The men, meanwhile, in their distorted desire, twist an expression of concern into an opportunity for control. Even if they learn how to talk the talk about the God-life, these men never learn to dance to the God-rhythms.

Timothy, do not be discouraged by the presence of such men, for they have always lived among Imma's people and opposed her Way. Do you remember Jannes

and Jambres? They opposed Moses! If some men opposed Moses don't be surprised when other men oppose you, Timothy; indeed, women, too, will oppose you. Such people are arrogant, broken, and corrupt, and as regards the God-life they are counterfeiters. Not to worry, though, for eventually their corruption will become clear for all to see.

*Corruption  
rotting core  
from inside out  
living amidst Christ's Body  
Vigilance!*

God, it's me. I have known people with the form of religion but without it's power, people who could talk the talk but never walked the walk. Imma, forgive me those times when I have been that person. Though I have never been as bad a guy as UPaul describes, I have failed to love my enemy, failed to bless those who cursed me, failed to pray for those who persecuted me. I routinely search for the speck in my neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in my own eye. Oh, Imma, I may not be the scoundrel UPaul describes, yet I know this warning is also for me.

## 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Timothy, you have experienced my God-life boot camp. You know what I say, what I do, and why I do it. You have witnessed first-hand my trust, which is powered by *agape*. You have been by my side to observe my patience, my perseverance, and my persecutions. (Do you remember what happened in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra? Oh my, those were harrowing events! But I endured, for Abba helped me dodge destruction. Truth be told: living the God-life with integrity will always lead to being crossways with someone. It is those who manipulate and deceive—others and themselves—that seem to get away with everything even while they go from bad to worse.)<sup>58</sup> But back to you, Timothy. Abide in what you have learned from me; make my words and my life your home. As a babe you learned the gift of the Word—that the Word will make you wise in the God-life and lead to your becoming whole and complete through Jesus the Anointed.

The sacred texts that comprise the Word, when taken together,<sup>59</sup> are God-breathed. Each writer inhaled the

God-breath to craft their portion: the poems and the prayers; the long, winding narratives and the short, pithy proverbs; the critiques of kings and the comfort of the oppressed; the parables that look like history and the history that conveys metaphor; the laments, the praise, and the thanksgiving—all of it, as a whole, was shaped and formed by the God-breath. Their writings create a library of truth that points to Abba and, when taken together, exhale the God-life. Each text in this library has its own perspective and sometimes they argue among themselves. However, they share a common purpose: to teach the mind how to think about the God-life; to confront perversions that distort our humanity; to redirect and guide people back toward the God-rhythms; and cultivate right relationships with Abba, one another, and the creation. The God-breathed Word shapes and forms Abba's servants and makes us able to live as new creation.

*God-breathed:*

*I was 17*

*having moved out of my parents' home  
a good kid who had lost his way.*

*God-breathed:*

*the youth pastor taught on Romans  
twenty other kids were in the room but  
he was teaching to me and me alone.*

*God-breathed:*

*the Word opened my mind to new vistas  
my heart to vulnerable possibilities  
my spirit was exploding.*

*God-breathed:*

*I read the Word that summer and  
the Word read me  
as I breathed deeply of the God-life for the first time.*

God, it's me. I thank you for Pastor Bill's love of the Word; even more his trust that your Word brings life. He taught me and modeled for me what the God-life is all about. He and I may not agree on everything about what it means to be a Christian, but I know his heart belongs to you. I thank you that Pastor Bill was like UPaul to my being Timothy. Abba, help me pay it forward and teach another to love your Word. I know it will love them right back.

## 2 Timothy 4:1-8

In the presence of Imma and Jesus the Anointed, who will distinguish<sup>60</sup> between the living and the dead, and with an eye on the horizon awaiting his second advent and the unveiling of his kin-dom's full glory, I charge you: Proclaim Imma's Word. Be ready whenever and wherever to invite trust, strengthen hope, and show *agape* with your words. Confront, as needed, albeit gently. Set boundaries, as needed, with firmness. Do all this with a goal of encouraging all who hear you to dance the God-rhythms. Don't give up on this work, for it is the work of a lifetime not merely a moment.

There will always be moments when people refuse to listen to truths that lead them to wholeness and Imma's *shalom*. They will gather in silos of confirmation bias to listen as pundits expound fake news endlessly. They will follow conspiracies down rabbit holes of their own making, all to avoid confronting reality. You, however, are not to join them on their quests. Instead, with eyes and ears open, with resolve and resiliency firmly set in your heart, do the work of an inviter: serve everyone in ways that point toward the God-life and that invite them to dance the God-rhythms.

Timothy, I am an empty cask of wine<sup>61</sup>—all I have to give has been given. My time on this earth is coming to an end. All that I have given has been given to Imma and for Imma. I have agonized to bring forth justice and joy. I have fully discharged my calling. I have guarded and protected that which is good and just and which shines clear in the light of the sun. Now I am confident in what awaits me: Jesus, who is sovereign over the Body, will present me the Olympians' wreath—symbol of the victory he and I have won together—a wreath he also will give to all those who long for the Day of his unveiling.

*Quest*

*for recognition and praise?*

*for being the most shut-up-I'm-always right?*

*Quest*

*for fulfillment and satisfaction?*

*for serving Jesus with all my heart, mind and strength?*

*Quest*

*pouring out my spirit, my soul, my everything  
until there is only you, and I am complete.*

God, it's me. I'm not quite as close to the end as UPaul, but I can imagine the way he felt, for I have passed the time when there are more sunrises behind me than before me. I have passed the time when I want to leave a mark on this world and moved toward a longing to leave a legacy. Imma, may my legacy be that I loved you fully, that I fulfilled the calling you placed upon my life, that someone grew to love you because of your life was at work through me.

## 2 Timothy 4:9-22

Timothy, I long to see you in my final days. I am saddened by what has happened these past few months. Demas, who loved the ways of the world too much, found our hardship too great and deserted me for Thessaloniki. Crescens went to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke stuck it out and remains with me.

I need you to get Mark and bring him with you, as he is helpful to my Good News work. (By the way, I sent Tychicus to Ephesus, so he isn't here but has not deserted me.) When you come, stop by Troas and get my coat from Carpus. Also get my books and notes. I especially want to re-read my notes.

Alexander the metalworker harmed me much. Abba will release him to his desires. You, too, should be careful with Alexander, for he is hostile to the Good News. The first time I came before the Roman courts, everyone fled in fear. I don't blame them or hold it against them, for the Roman courts are perilous in these times. Abba stood with me and strengthened me, though. With Abba by my side, I was able to stand and speak the Good News—it was carried to completion so both the Romans and others in the court heard the witness to what Abba has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus! Indeed, I was spared being fed to the lions—may Jesus be praised. And I know Jesus will continue to spare me until the day when I am fully rescued and ushered into the kin-dom. To Jesus be glory today, tomorrow and into eternity! Amen.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila and also the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained in Corinth and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus—such are the joys and concerns of Imma's beloved. Try to get here before winter, before the weather is too bad and traveling becomes treacherous. Eubulus says, "Hello!" as does Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the beloved. May Abba bless and keep your spirit, and may loving-kindness surround you and all whom you love.

*The end comes too soon for some  
too late for others  
hospice called as time expires  
What is your legacy beyond your expiration date?*

God, it's me. I hear UPaul putting the final pieces of his life's puzzle in place. He seeks a nice and tidy end to his earthly days, which is unlikely. What is more likely—and always a blessing—is to be surrounded by love as our sojourn on this earth ends. I pray I might be surrounded by such love now and in the decades, years, months, days, hours, minutes, and moments that mark my final journey to you.

## Titus 1:1-4

UPaul, Abba's servant and a sent one of Jesus: sent to strengthen the faith of those whom Abba has claimed, chosen, and called to experience the truth that shapes and forms them for the God-life. I have been sent to proclaim Abba's promise of life anew and life eternal, a promise Abba made before the beginning of time (and we know Abba does not lie so the promise is certain). This promise has been unveiled in this present season, and I have participated in the unveiling through my preaching and teaching, as Abba, our Rescuer, commanded me to do. To Titus, my heart and my son, with whom we share in the experience of trusting in Jesus and being assured of our belovedness: loving-kindness and *shalom* from Abba and Jesus the Anointed, our Rescuer.

*Promise made, promise kept  
Bygone of a former era (in human terms)  
Sacred trust (from Abba's lips)*

God, it's me. From before the beginning of time: claimed, chosen, and called. After the end of all things: claimed, chosen, and called. Every moment of every day in between: claimed, chosen, and called. I thank you, Abba, for the assurance that my belovedness is based on your promise rather than my pledge, your grace rather than my goodness, your identity rather than my integrity. Though I seek to honor my pledges and live a good life as a person of integrity, I fail where you fulfill. What I can only do partially, you have already done completely.

**Titus 1:5-9**

Titus, my heart, I left you in Crete for a reason: that you might organize the work of ministry by choosing leaders wise in the God-life to teach others how to dance the God-rhythms. These leaders must be squeaky clean—no one should be able to accuse them of any shenanigans: not even a hint of malice nor tainted motives, neither wanton nor wasteful, neither rowdy nor rude. Leaders in the gathering need to manage their personal lives well—with a solid foundation in the home, including guiding their children, if they have them, toward trusting Imma. As those who oversee others, they must avoid all arrogance, anger, and apathy. As well, they must avoid being quarrelsome,<sup>62</sup> violent, or greedy.

Instead, leaders should love the stranger<sup>63</sup> and be ready to swing wide the doors of their hearts and homes to them. Leaders should love all that is good and just and noble. Their inward self should mirror their outward self. Their relationships should express Imma's *agape*,<sup>64</sup> for they are set apart from the brokenness of this world and set apart for the God-life. Good leaders embrace the Good News as taught by truth-tellers and sent ones; they encourage others with the Good News that has been handed down to them and correct distortions of the truth that lead to perversions of the God-life.

*Leadership matters  
needless the number of dead  
please, just tell the truth*

God, it's me. I seek to be a leader whose inside mirrors my outside—what others see is who I am. I pray that others see one who is hospitable (loving the stranger); who loves the good, just, and noble; whose relationships express *agape*, and whose teaches the Good News. I believe that is what others see...on most days. Imma, forgive me for those days when others see something (and someone) quite different.

**Titus 1:10-16**

Titus, you have a leadership challenge before you. The gatherings of Jesus on Crete are filled with people with rebellious hearts. I'm not sure what they love more: arguing with each other or deceiving each other. Even one of Crete's own truth-tellers said of them, "Cretans always lie!

They're evil brutes and lazy gluttons, too!"<sup>65</sup> This is such a true statement!

A unique leadership challenge will be to confront the "circumcision" folks who seek to subvert the Good News by adding on rules and rituals, edicts and decrees, to Abba's freely given loving-kindness. They do it for profit and their own self-aggrandizement, even though it negatively impacts entire families. They do not care and must be silenced. When you confront these circumcision folks, do it with clarity and directness. Rebuke them.<sup>66</sup>

Rebuke, also, those who listen to them so they will remain sturdy and stable, able to trust Imma. Rebuke them so they will stop listening to myths and fables and begin to focus their attention on learning the God-rhythms handed down by truth-tellers and sent ones. Rebuke them so they will listen to Imma's commands rather than the suggestions of those who distort the God-life.

To those whose integrity shines clear in the light of the sun, all things lead deeper into the God-life: all their thoughts and prayers, all their choices that lead to action, all become paths toward new creation. To those who gorge themselves on corruption, nothing really matters. They pretend to dance the God-rhythms but do not know the beat. They embrace idolatry and apathy and are unable to do the good works for which Abba created them.

*I felt the sting of rebuke as a slap across my cheek.  
The slap was real—the tears, too.  
Deserved? Maybe. Maybe not. Does it matter?*

*I felt the sting of rebuke as a piercing of my heart.  
The words spoken were kind and gentle—also true.  
Deserved? Certainly, which made me grateful.*

*How have you felt the sting of rebuke?  
As slap?  
Or as spoken kindness?*

God, it's me. I tend to avoid rebuke: both being rebuked and being the one doing the rebuking. Such open confrontations are difficult for me. Abba, as you know, open confrontations are impossible to avoid, so help me learn to speak the truth in love and hear it when it is spoken to me. Help me learn to accept responsibility that belongs to me and not to accept responsibility that belongs to another. Help me to learn comfort in the hard things of kin-dom relationships, for

the sake of learning to dance the God-rhythms to a beat I actually know and inwardly feel (and not just pretend to know).

### Titus 2:1 – 3:2<sup>a</sup>

Titus, speak health into the Body. Instruct older men to be modest and humble, living with integrity and dignity worthy of those who belong to Imma. Instruct them to love and love and keep on loving, for *agape* is the foundation of what we embrace.

Speak health into the Body. Instruct older women to live with reverence before Imma, avoiding the idle chatter of gossip and slander caused by too much wine. They should be able to teach well and model for the younger woman the Way of Jesus that unites all life toward the goal of *shalom*—bringing Imma’s goodness to hearth and home. The older women can encourage the younger women to organize their homes so that no one will be able to critique Imma’s Word or deny Imma because of what they see amidst her family.

Speak health into the Body. Instruct the younger men also about the Way of Jesus, especially about using self-control rather than giving vent to juvenile enthusiasm. Model for these younger men what it looks like to live as one whose integrity shines clear in the light of the sun and whose walk matches their talk. Model and teach them that their behavior reflects upon all of Imma’s family, for good or for ill.

Speak health into the Body. Instruct those who work for others<sup>68</sup> to be respectful rather than resentful of their supervisors. By being honest and trustworthy in all things, employees show respect and invite respect. Help them to understand that showing respect is a means of making the Good News more attractive.

Titus, speak health into the Body for Imma’s loving-kindness has been unveiled for all people. This loving-kindness woos people to say “Yes” to the God-life and “No” to those things that distort and pervert the true self. Imma’s loving-kindness entices people to live not as they are but as they are becoming, to live not as they have always lived but as a reflection of the new creation into which they are being formed. Imma’s loving-kindness is an invitation to awe and wonder as we await the Great Unveiling that will occur on the Day of Jesus, when the *kairos*<sup>69</sup> for Jesus’ second advent arrives and we see Jesus our Rescuer in his fullness—he who emptied himself of divine privilege to snatch us from the clutches of the

Accuser! Having been whisked away from the Accuser, and by Jesus himself, we are ready, willing, and able—even zealous!—to do the work of new creation for which we have been created.

So, Titus, teach these things. Encourage everyone. Rebuke those who need it (and don’t be shy). Demand respect. Remind the gathering to take great care in how they behave in front of authorities and those with power. Obey laws that are just and always be prepared to participate in that which is just and good and leads to *shalom*. Neither vilify, insult, nor slander anyone but respond to everyone with humility.

*Speak health into the Body:*

*No to snarky comments at the back of the sanctuary*

*No to cranky emails on Monday morning*

*Nothing anonymous and no, “People say....”*

*Speak health into the Body:*

*Yes to going directly to a person*

*Yes to respectful speaking (and listening)*

*Yes to seeking unity in the community*

*Speak health into the Body:*

*for the world is watching how we love one another (or not)*

*for our children are watching everything we model*

*for Imma is watching, too.*

God, it’s me. I long to be a part of a healthy church. I know most churches have healthy ministries here and there, but I long for the church whose life-long members refuse to utter the snarky comment toward the latest pastor. I long for the church community that confronts gossip and demands respectful dialogue. I long for the church that forgives seven times seventy, turns the other cheek, and lives as if they believe “the greatest is love.” Imma, where can I find such a church? [And I hear in response: “Brad, just do your part.”] Yes, Imma. May it be so.

### Titus 3:3-8

At one point in our lives, Titus, we were both the kind of people who could not think, did not care, and walked around deceived about the God-life. Our passions ran amok like floodwaters that overwhelm a river’s banks; we were at our passions’ beck and call and did whatever

gave them (and us) pleasure. During this season of our lives, malice controlled us, and jealousy dominated our thoughts—hating and being hated were played as a kind of blood sport. But then Jesus happened.

When the loving-kindness of Jesus was unleashed upon the world, we began to glimpse Abba's love for you and me, for those we love and those we hate, for anyone and everyone—the entire world! And then Jesus happened to us.

Abba rescued us in Jesus, not because we deserved it but because his character is mercy. He rescued us for new creation—making us his personal renovation project through the *dunamis*<sup>20</sup> of the Divine Spirit. Abba spared nothing to make us new creation: the Spirit overshadowing us again and again; Jesus the Rescuer fortifying us with loving-kindness all around and within; Abba himself pronouncing us “Not guilty!” in the heavenly courts and then writing up adoption papers to make us a part of his family and the eternal kin-dom.

All this is a gift, and the hope it brings will never end. Trust this, Titus. Trust it and teach it. Help your people so to trust this truth that they ponder it morning and evening and devote themselves to living lives of justice and joy. This truth is not just for you and me, Titus, nor is it only for your gatherings but for everyone, for the entire human race.

*Someone once told me, “Be who you are.”*

*Which me am I to be?*

*Is it the me I see in the mirror?*

*Is it the me of my worst moments?*

*Is it the me of my genial self (with some bad habits)?*

*It is the me Abba sees through love-clouded eyes.*

God, it's me. I seek to be who I am: beloved child of God, servant of Jesus, one in whom your Spirit dwells. I do not always succeed (and arguably seldom succeed), but I always remember the gift that inspires me to live for you. I remember and ponder the gift of a love that claimed, chose, and called me. I remember and wonder at how great your love is for everyone, for the entire human race. Help me today, Abba, to live as one who seeks justice and joy not just for myself but for everyone, for the entire human race.

## Titus 3:9-15

Titus, avoid endless argumentation, contentious controversies, and silly semantics that accomplish nothing but to distract from living the Way of Jesus. Decline the invitation to dispute with folks who indulge in such practices, for they gorge themselves upon that which fattens the tongue yet leaves the heart empty. Decline their invitation once and then twice; after the second time just walk away. Rest assured that such disputatious folks condemn themselves to walking in circles—their journey does not lead them into Imma's embrace.

As soon as Artemas or Tychicus arrive, try to come to me at Nicopolis, in western Greece, where I have decided to remain during the winter months. Do whatever you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos. They will need supplies for their journey so to be prepared for their service to Imma. Help your people practice holy habits that lead to doing good, that bring *shalom* to all, that care for others' needs. Practicing holy habits brings fruitfulness for work in the kin-dom.

Everyone here says, “Hello!” Greet those who love us in Jesus. May Jesus' loving-kindness be upon all y'all.

*Noise, noise, noise*

*Noise, noise*

*Noise*

*Listen for a time to the noise*

*Listen less to the noise*

*Listen not at all to the noise*

*See how easy that was? (And helpful, too!)*

God, it's me. UPaul's words to Titus, written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, speak to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are too many devoted to “endless argumentation, contentious controversies, and silly semantics that accomplish nothing but to distract from living the Way of Jesus.” Save us from ourselves! Save us from a culture of cacophony. Teach us the gift of walking away from debate, even while we remain open to dialogue. Give us discernment to perceive what conversations are life-giving and Spirit-led and which ones are merely a form of spiritual abuse. Abba, infuse within us the courage to decline the invitation to any conversation that does not draw us closer to you and deeper into the God-life.

## ENDNOTES

1 Scholars also refer to these letters as the Corpus Paulinum or Corpus Pastorale.

2 Compelling cases can be made both for authentic Pauline authorship and for a later date of composition. The description of a sophisticated organizational structure is the primary evidence of a 2<sup>nd</sup> century composition of the pastoral epistles. Evidence for a 1<sup>st</sup> century composition focuses on Paul's reference to Timothy being a third generation Christian (2 Timothy 1:5) and the letters being referenced by Ignatius and Origen, Apostolic Fathers writing in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

3 The Greek word *apostoleos*, from which we get apostle, literally means sent one.

4 *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace and means more than merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of social, spiritual, physical, and economic wellness for the entire community.

5 c.f. comment in the introduction that Jesus is sovereign over the ecclesiastical community, the Body of Jesus.

6 The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

7 *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others.

8 The Greek word UPaul used is *anypokriton* which means unfeigned, without hypocrisy.

9 *Torah* is the Hebrew word that translates into English as Law. I chose to use Torah rather than Law in the paraphrase to remind readers that Pablo's reference is not to a generalized ethical teaching but to the specific, covenantal obligations articulated in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

10 What follows are Calvin's three-fold purposes of the Law.

11 c.f. Matthew 7:13-14.

12 This passage is a good example of the fickleness of biblical chapters and verses. The story of how chapter and verse came to be originated after the invention of the Gutenberg press. An editor, seeking a marketing advantage for his translation of Scripture, decided to add in chapters and verses (and did a decent job with it). He would place marks upon the manuscript as notations while traveling by carriage from Paris to Rome (where he hoped to secure Papal patronage for his "new" version of the Bible). The joke among scholars is that the editor sometimes placed an errant mark when the carriage hit a pothole, leading to some awkward transitions. This passage is an example of such an awkward transition as UPaul begins personal remarks to Timothy that continue into chapter 2.

13 STAND: In the Hebrew Bible, the question is repeatedly asked, "Who can stand?" This question reaches its climax in the last chapter of the Hebrew Bible when Malachi asks of the Day of the

Lord, "Who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:2) The Book of Revelation takes up this theme when at the end of chapter 6 the question is asked again regarding who can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes. (Revelation 6:17) Then, in a powerful turn of events, Revelation 7 opens a window into heaven, and John sees four angels and then a multitude standing before the Lord. (Revelation 7:1, 9).

14 The Greek word UPaul used is *thelei* which can mean to wish, desire, will, intend or design. The first two of these verbs connote a permissive, laissez-faire engagement in the act of bringing salvation (making whole and complete). The last three verbs convey a more active, robust participation in the act of bringing salvation. Because all verb choices are linguistically legitimate for *thelei*, it suggests the translator's choice of verb is directed more by theological perspective than a firm linguistic basis. In the verses that follow, Imma's action is described as robust participation, which is why I chose design as the more appropriate English word to use in the paraphrase.

15 The Greek word *kairos* is one of two words for time, meaning the key moment when transformation happens.

16 c.f. Genesis 1:31.

17 c.f. Genesis 6:6 (in the NRSV and NIV).

18 c.f. John 3:16.

19 c.f. 1 Timothy 2:4.

20 The Greek word used is *hagios*, which is usually translated as holy and literally means set apart—both set apart from and set apart for.

21 1 Timothy 2:12-15 is a highly debated passage in which three views predominate regarding UPaul's stance on female teachers: (1) he does not permit any woman to teach, (2) he does not permit a woman to teach until she is properly trained, or (3) he will not permit *these women in Ephesus*, who have come under the influence of the false teachers, to teach. Further, there is also debate regarding UPaul's meaning in his reference to Adam and Eve: (1) Adam, as a man, had primacy over Eve and so all men have primacy over all women, or (2) Eve was deceived (and UPaul explains how this came to be) but the effects of Eve's being deceived were reversed "through childbearing," which is a reference to Mary. The interpretive paraphrase affirms the latter in both of these debates.

22 The Greek word *hypotage* means submission, subordination or obedience. Centuries of male dominated interpretation *assumes* UPaul is saying women must be obedient to men. However, the closest referent in the Greek is Abba! The obedience to which UPaul directs the Ephesian women is obedience to Abba.

23 I lean into interpretation rather than strict paraphrase in this passage. For example, while UPaul directs his advice to Timothy specifically to men (and makes reference to their wives), there are places in other letters in which UPaul greets or praises women elders and women deacons (c.f. Phoebe, a deacon, and Junia, an

apostle, in Romans 16:1,7). Therefore, I convey UPaul's counsel as regarding both men and women leaders.

24 Throughout the New Testament, those named as "deacon" are so named using the Greek word *diakonia*. There is no distinction made between men and women—all deacons are called by the same, letter for letter, name. Please stop using the term "deaconess," as there is no such role in Christian Church, and the term only serves to create a social hierarchy based on gender.

25 The Greek word *eilikrineia*, usually translated as "sincerity" or "purity," literally means "clear in the light of the sun," as in there exist no contaminants, no mixed ingredients.

26 1 Timothy 3:11 seems out of place in the flow of this passage, especially if UPaul offered this counsel regarding all women at all times. However, given that UPaul had already addressed the disruptive behavior of certain women unique to the Ephesian gathering, 3:11 makes more sense as an aside that refers specifically to these women and their behavior, which is why I placed it in parentheses.

27 The Greek word used is *bathmon*, which means a step in a stairway. Usually *bathmon* is translated as stage or position but I chose to paraphrase with stairway because I could not get a certain 1970's rock song out of my head.

28 The Greek word used is *hysterois*, usually translated as later but given its obvious association with the English hysteria, I play with the concept that a mark of apostasy in later days is its tendency toward paranoia, fear, and turmoil.

29 c.f. Genesis 1:31.

30 The Greek word *malista*, which means especially, is used in this sentence. The ESV translates as, "...the Living God is the Savior of all men and especially those who believe." Is it that Abba saves all people but there is a higher, more qualitatively rich category of salvation for those who believe? Or is it that Abba saves all people and we who believe are especially aware of our salvation?

31 I seek to be Trinitarian in this poem, so the proper word here is sanctification. However, given that I seek in the *Praying Paul* series to avoid theological jargon, I use what I hope is a more intelligible term.

32 UPaul's counsel to Timothy was gender specific in accordance with 1<sup>st</sup> century culture. In 1<sup>st</sup> century culture, the ability of widows to find employment and be able to care for themselves was extremely limited. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this notion of those whose opportunities or abilities are limited (e.g., "a widow") applies to many folks, especially those with mental or physical challenges. Although I stick to the Greek text in using the term widow, the interpretive paraphrase has this wider, 21<sup>st</sup> century audience in mind. Further, UPaul's counsel was specifically shaped by the unique situation found in Ephesus. Just as no church takes UPaul's counsel to Timothy literally in terms of caring for every widow in the local, 21<sup>st</sup> century congregation, so also a similar interpretive method should be applied generally. These are provisional instructions rather than eternal determinations of what should happen in a church—good rules of thumb but not a blueprint for the pastoral care committee.

33 In the Reformed tradition, the justification for ordination is found here: there are some tasks integral to the purpose and identity of the Body of Christ. The Church, therefore, calls and sets apart men and women for these tasks.

34 c.f. Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:17.

35 This phrase is taken from Martin Luther's definition of the purpose of preaching.

36 UPaul seemed to have moved on to a new topic when he told Timothy to drink some wine. I hear this verse as returning to the topic of leadership, though this could be advice UPaul is giving to Timothy.

37 The Greek text of 1 Timothy 6:1-2a refers to slavery. These verses require me to lean into interpretation rather than translation for the paraphrase. I wondered what these verses would sound like if I rejected the notion of slavery and cast the historic sin of slavery into our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. I am not pleased by the results and open to reader suggestions for an edit in the second edition of *Praying Paul*. For a thorough discussion of Paul in the context of American social ethics, see New Testament scholar Brian Blount, *Then The Whisper Put On Flesh: New Testament Ethics In An African American Context*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 2001.

38 *Imago dei* is a Latin term theologians use that means image of God. Theologians use *imago dei* to refer to the truth that all humankind are created bearing God's image within them (c.f. Genesis 1:27).

39 The Greek term usually translated "love of money" is *philagryia*, which is a compound word whose component words literal mean brotherly/sisterly love + joy.

40 The Greek word used is *dikaiosune*, which is usually translated as righteousness. In this work, *dikaiosune* will be paraphrased as right relationships for two reasons: for its linguistic connections with the Hebrew words for justice (*tzedakah* and *mishpat*, both of which connote relational nuances) and to delineate a central premise in UPaul's theology. For UPaul, theology precedes ethics (relationship before action, belonging before behavior). Righteousness in the English language has adopted an almost exclusively behavior focus that I want to redirect toward a more biblical perspective. For the record, though, I am not opposed to ethical behavior 😊.

41 The Greek word UPaul used twice in this sentence is *agonizou*, which is usually translated as fight but has clear linguistic connection to agony and agonize. I seek in this passage to play with *agonizou's* alternative meaning to create a slightly different thematic message than it ordinarily found in 1 Timothy 6:12.

42 The Greek word is *apolausis*.

43 This phrase is a Greek idiom for purity and translates *bagneia*.

44 *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and conveys the sense of a perfect, self-giving love that seeks another's well-being.

45 The Greek word used is *sophronismos*, which is often translated as self-control. However, as a cognate of *Sophia*, wisdom, it can also translate as prudence and conveys a sense of wisdom in one's decision-making and actions.

46 Paul is in and out of prison frequently in his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans' presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Pavel's preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off-shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

47 c.f. Philippians 2:6. This phrase is not in the 2 Timothy text but is an interpretation of its wider meaning.

48 The Greek word used is *aphtharsia* and literally means without corruption, which describes a qualitative state of being. *Aphtharsia* is often translated as immortality, which conveys a quantitative state of existence. I am attempting to convey the qualitative sense of life eternal rather than the quantitative length of eternal life.

49 The Greek text of 1:15 says everyone has deserted UPaul, though in 1:16 he mentions Onesiphorus with commendation.

50 This note is an addition to the Greek text and seeks to frame the cultural context of Onesiphorus' actions. In an age before electronic files and Google, how did people learn the whereabouts of their imprisoned friends?

51 The Greek word is *spermato*, usually translated as descended.

52 The Greek word used is *orthotomounta*, which is usually translated as accurately handles. The literal definition, however, refers to making a straight cut.

53 The Greek word used is *kenophonias*, which is often translated as empty or godless chatter. However, it's primary definition is empty disputing. There is a difference between mere chatter and disputation, and in our culture, it is "empty disputing" which leads many away from faith.

54 UPaul used a word play to distinguish between *timen* and *atimian*, often translated as special versus common. However, *timen* can mean integrity or dignity, while *atimian* can mean infamy or disgrace.

55 The Greek can be translated as youthful passions, too, which is often read primarily as a sexual reference. However, there is a broader and more complex set of indiscretions associated with the underdeveloped, still maturing brains of adolescents, to which juvenile eagerness refers.

56 The Greek word used is *apeitheis*, which can be translated as disobedient but suggests the English apathy.

57 *Dunamis* is the Greek word for power from which we get the English words dynamic and dynamite.

58 UPaul seems to go on a detour in 3:12-13, which I have put in parentheses, but returns to his original focus in 3:14.

59 English translations of 3:16 read "All Scripture is God-breathed." The question for interpreters is the referent point for the word all. Does all refer to each verse? If so, every verse is God-

breathed, which is the argument of more conservative interpreters. The extreme version of such interpretation argues that every "jot and tittle" is God-breathed. Does all refer to the totality of Scripture taken as a whole? If so, the totality is God-breathed, which leaves room for minor inconsistencies or, as is often the case, comparative contrasts (c.f. Leviticus 21:17-19 and Matthew 21:14).

60 The Greek word used is *kreinen*, often translated as judge but more literally means distinguish or decide. I wonder about the distinction between Jesus as judge deciding life and death versus Jesus distinguishing between those who are alive and those who are not, taken as a kind of metaphor. That the word for spiritual life (*zoe*) rather than biological life (*bios*) is used gives some justification for this paraphrase, even if it is a minority view.

61 Full disclosure: I write this while on vacation in the Arizona wine country. I am at a loss as to how to paraphrase "poured out like a drink offering," a phrase grounded in a culture of food and drink offerings for which I cannot imagine a helpful analogy. Readers' suggestions are welcome.

62 The Greek word used is *paroinon*, which can mean drunkenness or quarrelsome. While neither state is good for church leaders, it is my experience that there are more quarrelsome leaders than drunken leaders in the church. Nominating Committees may want to ponder Titus 1:7 before engaging their work.

63 The Greek word UPaul used is *philaxenon*, which is usually translated as hospitable. It is a compound word of *phila*, brotherly or sisterly love (e.g. Philadelphia), and *xenon*, stranger. We use the English word xenophobia to talk about fear of the stranger (xenon + phobos/fear) but do not use the word xenophilia as much. Titus makes xenophilia the first positive mark of the overseer.

64 *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others.

65 From the Cretan philosopher Epimenides.

66 The Greek syntax is unclear whether UPaul's counsel to "rebuke them" refers to the leaders teaching circumcision or to the hearers who are responding to them. I am paraphrasing as if UPaul's counsel to rebuke was both/and counsel, though I am aware the referent can only apply to one of the two groups.

67 This chapter reflects the culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century: patriarchal and exploitative. While I keep the social categories reflected in the chapter (e.g. younger vs. older men, younger vs. older women), I lean into interpretation in the paraphrase. I seek to convey the "spirit" of UPaul's counsel that is timeless even though I maintain the "letter" of the culture in UPaul's era.

68 UPaul refers in this paragraph to slaves and masters. I have no interest in trying to paraphrase a helpful version of slave/master relationships. While I acknowledge the verbiage is in the text, I reject the premise that such relationships are valid or tolerable and believe UPaul tried to subvert these relationships without outright denial of their legitimacy. Therefore, I lean into interpretation rather than mere paraphrase in this paragraph.

69 The Greek word *kairos* is one of two words for time, meaning the key moment when transformation happens.

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70 *Dunamis* is the Greek word for power from which we get the English words dynamic and dynamite.

# PRAYING PHILEMON:



DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE  
THROUGH PARAPHRASE, POETRY AND PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION TO PRAYING PHILEMON

The Letter to Philemon is a story of a slave. The slave's name is Onesimus, which in Greek means useful. Many slaves in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were named Useful, which hardly comes as a surprise for slaves were very useful to their owners. Philemon, the slave owner, was upset with Useful, his slave who had stolen from him and had run away, so Paul intervened. The Letter to Philemon tells the story of that intervention.

I mention with interest the thorny issue of how to convey a 1<sup>st</sup> century faith to a 21<sup>st</sup> century church. How should we paraphrase a message that is embedded in a culture that embraced patriarchy, misogyny and slavery, a culture in which oppressive government, social suspicion, and violence were ethically normative?

Readers of other letters in the *Praying Paul* series may notice that, when it has come to the above-named social issues, I have struggled to convey a comfortable balance between scrupulous translation of the Greek text and poetic license that conveys the eternal truths of the Gospel to our postmodern age. I fear that too scrupulous connection to the Greek text may appear to give justification to the injustices inherent in these cultural practices. I fear, also, that poetic license can be taken too far and thereby create words that conform to our ethical sensibilities but do not conform to the Word.

To this point in the *Praying Paul* series, I have attempted to lean toward the poetic when confronted with how to convey cultural practices that are ethically abominable. That is, I have leaned closer to “interpretive” than “paraphrase” with such passages. When I have not built a bridge between ancient and postmodern culture, it is because the cultural practices were too firmly embedded in the Greek text, and I could find no way to write a paraphrase without doing violence to the integrity of this project.

To this point in the *Praying Paul* series, I have generally spoken of master-slave relationships in terms of employer-employee relationships.<sup>1</sup> I have attempted to soften the abomination of master-slave relationships by translating them into something we can accept and remain ethical.

With *Praying Philemon*, I reverse course.

Because the narrative of Paul's Letter to Philemon centers around slavery, I have chosen to accept the language about master and slave. I have not used bondservant (ESV) nor servant (KJV). Useful was a slave, and Philemon owned him as a master. This is offensive. If

you are offended by this language, you are reading the language correctly.

I chose to keep the master-slave language of Paul's letter because it allowed me to convey something intrinsic that Paul wanted Philemon to hear (and that I believe we are to hear, too): Useful is a child of God. Useful is our brother. We are all family. The transformational work of Jesus in our lives and in the Creation creates a new order of things that breaks down all humanly constructed hierarchies. This message is more powerfully conveyed if the master-slave language of the Letter to Philemon is maintained.

Finally, as readers of other work in the *Praying Paul* series know, I refer to Paul with versions of his name from other languages in order to remind myself and my readers the Gospel is a global blessing. It belongs to God who gave it to all the world. In the current work, the Apostle is named Pal. Pal is the Telugu translation of the English name Paul and comes from the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in India. I chose Telugu because I had never heard of it before; Telugu was utterly foreign to me (I had to Google the location of Andhra and Pradesh).

Yet the people who speak Telugu are also the people for whom Jesus died. Learning about them has been a surprise to me, but God knew them before the beginning of time. God is a God of surprises and uses something abominable, like a story of a slave, to teach us how to love.

Brad Munroe  
August 2021

## Philemon 1–7

Pal, the slave of Jesus the Anointed, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our beloved, who shares a synergy<sup>2</sup> with us as we accomplish Abba's work together—also to Apphia, our sister, and Archippus, our fellow toiler in the fields of Abba's harvest, and to the gathering<sup>3</sup> that worships, prays and learns in your home. Loving-kindness to all of you from Abba, our Father, and from Jesus the Anointed, who is sovereign above Caesar.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks, thanks, thanks! That's what I always do when I remember you in my prayers, Philemon. When I hear about your *agape* for all of Abba's family, I give thanks. When I hear about your trust in Jesus, who is sovereign above Caesar, I give thanks.

While giving thanks in prayer, I also pray that our *koinonia*<sup>5</sup>—our deep sharing of spiritual partnership—will energize<sup>6</sup> you and deepen your experience of all the goodness we share together in Jesus, for we are family together in him. Your *agape*<sup>7</sup> leads me into joy and speaks courage to my heart. You, my brother, soften the clenched fists and tightened shoulders<sup>8</sup> of Abba's family—they rest assured in Abba's love because of you.

*Koinonia*  
more than a potluck  
more, even, than a prayer meeting.

*Koinonia*  
abiding in Jesus together  
breathing as one the divine Breath.

*Koinonia*  
who am I without you or you without me?<sup>9</sup>  
who are we without the Breath?<sup>9</sup>

God, it's me. I have worked with many, many people but only a few partners in the Gospel. Is it me? Is it my reticence for connecting at a deep level? Is it the way we "do" church in this time? Abba, open me to ministry partners: to seeing other Christians as brothers and sisters, to encountering one another as a holy family. May your *agape* abide in us that we would lead each other into joy and give courage to each other's hearts.

## Philemon 8–16

Let me be blunt: I could command you to do the right thing. I prefer to appeal to your decency and honor, for I know you to be one who lives the God-life with integrity. Therefore, I appeal to your *agape* for Imma and for me. You know me, Philemon. I am Pal, an old man who is now in chains, a slave of Jesus the Anointed. It is I, Pal, who appeals to you for Onesimus, whose name means Useful. He became my son—our family in the kin-dom—while I was in chains. Now he who was useless to you has become useful both to you and to me.

I am returning Useful to you, though he is my very heart. I would prefer to keep Useful with me, for I continue to need help while I am in chains<sup>9</sup> for sharing the Good News. I would prefer you were here to help me yourself, but as you cannot Useful would be useful to me.

I will not do anything without permission. Any gift you give to my heart must be given freely, with your consent and without coercion. Here's a thought: Perhaps Useful ran away from you for a time so you could have him back forever! And Useful's return is better than had he never left, for he left your slave and returns your brother. Jesus the Anointed, sovereign above Caesar, has made y'all family together in Imma's kin-dom.

*Useful—viewed as a matter of opinion:*  
one person's trash is another person's treasure  
what works for one doesn't necessarily work for all.

*Useful is not an opinion but a person:*  
the grandmother who prays  
the young adult who leaves water in the desert.

*Useful—viewed as a tool:*  
three easy steps to financial security  
the kitchen aid that makes meal prep a cinch.

*Useful is not a tool but a treasure found:*  
the person whose heart has been opened to Jesus  
the one through whom the God-life is invited.

God, it's me. Help me see others not as their utility—what they can or cannot do—but according to their identity—that we are family together in Jesus. I pray that I would be useful to them: through prayer and compassion, to open hearts and invite the God-life.

## Philemon 17-25

Philemon, if you hold me dear as a brother and member of your own family, take Useful into your heart<sup>10</sup> as you would take me into your heart. If Useful owes you anything, I will pay the debt; I will redeem and ransom him as Jesus redeemed and ransomed all.<sup>11</sup> I am writing this promise with my own hand!

Brother, you owe me your very life, for you learned to dance the God-rhythms through me; my preaching the Good News led you to the God-life. I desire to receive a blessing from you: Give my heart a good night's rest in Jesus in the assurance that you will open your heart to Useful. Confident you will obey me—not because you must but as an act of thanksgiving—I make this request knowing you will do even more than I ask.

One last request, Philemon: Prepare a place for me in your home. I hope to be set free from these Roman chains soon, in answer to all the prayers you and the gathering have lifted up for me.

Epaphras, who is also in chains for doing the work of Jesus the Anointed, sends greetings, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke—all of whom are *koinonia* with me as partners in the Good News. May the loving-kindness of Jesus the Anointed buoy your spirit and the spirit of everyone in the gathering.

*The door opened.  
The silhouette was backlit.  
I did not recognize this stranger, this intruder.  
As he stepped closer—step by step—  
I found his presence menacing,  
until he stepped into the light,  
and I discovered the stranger was  
me.*

God, it's me. Save me from the sin of "othering" other people. Save me from the sin of putting myself "over" others, as if my whim should define their will. Open me to embrace the brother who is broken and the sister who is a stranger. As you hold me in Jesus, may I hold them.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The exception to this statement is in *Praying Galatians* where I translated the Greek *doulos* as slave; however, Galatians does not speak of master/slave relationships but of the relationship between Jesus and Paul and between Torah and believers.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word Paul used is *synergo*, which is often translated as fellow worker.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word used is *ecclesia*, which is usually translated as church. The literal meaning is gathering, with a focus on the people present (gathered) rather than the place (where they are gathered). I have chosen to paraphrase *ecclesia* as gathering rather than church because too often the English usage of church refers to a building not the Body of Christ as beloved community.

<sup>4</sup> The early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord. The implicit truth of the Christian confession was to prioritize Jesus' authority as above Caesar's authority.

<sup>5</sup> *Koinonia* in Greek means intimate, spiritual communion.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word used is *energeo*, which is often translated as become effective.

<sup>7</sup> *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love and connotes a perfect, selfless, outpouring of benevolence toward others. The New Testament has different words for different kinds of love, including: *agape*, *eros* which is sexual love, *philos* which is deep friendship or brotherly/sisterly love, (thus the reason Philadelphia is "The City of Brotherly Love), and *storge* which is empathy or a

close bond. There are seven Greek words for love, of which the New Testament uses four.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek word used is *splanchna*, which the ESV translates as hearts. The literal meaning is intestines, which is obviously a 1<sup>st</sup> century cultural expression. I considered paraphrasing something like, "you unclench the roiled bowels of Abba's people." However, no matter how I toyed with language, nothing I imagined seemed appropriate.

<sup>9</sup> Paul is in and out of prison frequently in his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans' presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Paul's preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish off-shoot) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contraction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek word used is *prolambano*, which can mean take into oneself or welcome.

<sup>11</sup> This phrase is not in the Greek text but is added to emphasize that Paul is referencing his willingness to serve for Useful in the manner that Jesus served for Paul, Philemon and all.





## PRAYING PAUL: AN INTERPRETIVE PARAPHRASE

Praying Paul is an interpretive paraphrase that interprets the language of the original Greek text and provides cultural insights to help the reader understand its meaning. Praying Paul seeks to capture the rhythm, beat and harmony of the original text yet also convey wisdom, ethics, and hope for today by using paraphrase, poetry, and prayer.

### SAMPLE FROM PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11

Who, though he wore Abba's dress shirt,  
cared not to claim ownership of Abba's wardrobe;

Instead, he went naked into the world,  
taking the shirt off his back to give to the oppressed;

He who possessed all divine power and prerogative, let it go and would not take it up again;

Not until his servant's work was complete;  
and his death assured—even death on a Roman cross!

Oh, Abba was well-pleased, lifting him up to highest heaven and then even higher;

Abba gave to him the Name above every name, to be sung in depths and heights, now and into eternity;

This Name, Jesus, causes knees to bend, this Name, Jesus, causes tongues to shout praise;

And Abba dressed Jesus in his full splendor,  
the divine wardrobe—all of it!

Even a crown.

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*Emptiness shapes vision;  
beauty found in the space between.*

*Absence invites waiting and longing;  
becoming the measure of hope.*

*Stillness the canvas of our becoming.  
Silence the symphony we learn to hear.*

*Wonder and imagination, then, become the  
womb of divine nature perfected as human form.*

\*\*\*\*\*

God, it's me....

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Dr. Brad Munroe is Pastor to the Presbytery for the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and the Presbytery de Cristo. He earned his Doctor of Ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary, receiving the Outstanding Contribution to Ministry award for his dissertation in which he coined the phrase “blended worship.” *Praying Paul* is his third interpretive paraphrase, following *Praying Matthew* and *Praying Luke*. He is also the author of *Waging Peace: Developing Interpersonal Skills for Conflict Transformation*.